



JEEVADHARA

A POOR CHURCH FOR THE POOR

Edited by

Selva Rathinam

PROCESSED

MAY 05 2014

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Vol. XLIV 2014

ISSN 0970 - 1125

No. 260

JEEVADHARA

is published every month
alternately in English and Malayalam

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JOURNAL FOR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RESEARCH

A Poor Church for the Poor

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Editorial

“How I long for a poor Church for the poor!”

These are the words Jorge Bergoglio spoke after being elected Pope in 2013. What does the Pope mean by these words? How does he want us Catholics to think about poverty?

Poverty can be looked at from two different angles: as de-humanizing and as humanizing. Poverty is dehumanizing because it is inimical to human dignity¹ and therefore it is evil² and scandalous.³ According to the prophets, poverty is not by chance but by human injustice and therefore it is considered to be a curse on humanity. Poverty is also humanizing. How? We read in the beatitudes, “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Lk 6:20). Freed from material obstacles poverty enables one to be open to God and human as we see in the Acts of the Apostles. It is a blessing because God takes the side of the poor. Dehumanizing poverty is the material poverty where the poor lack even the basic necessities of life and therefore it is wholly contrary to the will of God. Humanizing poverty is the spiritual poverty where one renounces the worldly goods for doing the will of God and for being open to God and human. Reflection on the above two dimensions of poverty leads one to the third way of understanding poverty as a challenge and a commitment and this commitment consists of solidarity with the poor and protest against poverty as something contrary to the will of God. Here the poor are understood as victims of injustice and of material

¹ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973), 291.

² Alvara Barreiro, “Grass-Roots Ecclesial Communities and the Evangelization of the Poor,” *Foundations* 23 (Oct.-Dec. 1980): 314-316.

³ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 291-296.

poverty. God does not want anyone to be materially poor but God wants all of us Christians to be poor in Spirit. The spiritually poor are those who detach themselves from possessions and attach themselves to the Lord as the only source of salvation. Since Jesus identified himself with the poor (Mt 25), the Church, the mystical body of Christ becomes the Church of the poor, the suffering which undergoes persecution for the sake of justice. The "Church of the Poor" means, in the words of Pope John Paul II, that "Before today's forms of exploitation of the poor, the Church cannot remain silent. She also reminds the rich of their precise duties. Strong with the Word of God, she condemns the many injustices which unfortunately, even today are committed to the detriment of the poor."⁴ When we truly become the Church of the Poor, the poor will naturally feel at home in the Church.

Pope Francis wants Catholics to bring a distinctly Christian dimension to poverty issues. The essays in this issue attempt to do just that. In the first essay Selva Rathinam points out to the true meaning of poverty as viewed by Pope Francis and the implication of it especially to religious life. Nishant explodes the myth of the explosion of population as a cause for hunger and poverty in the world through the concept of the 'other' from Emmanuel Levinas. Thomas Malipurathu draws a parallel between Jesus movement in His time and the present day Church. Finally, James Dabhi analyses the causes, consequences and remedies of poverty through the lens of the Old Testament and reflects upon its relevance for India.

I thank sincerely all those who have contributed articles to this issue. My special thanks to Robert Rodrigues, the Karnataka Jesuit scholastic who helped me in preparing the manuscripts. It is hoped that these articles may help us listen to the biblical witness regarding poverty and by examining the contemporary situation of poverty in India we may arrive at conversion to become a poor Church for the poor.

Selva Rathinam

⁴ See <http://catholicssocialteachings.weebly.com/poverty-and-theological-reflection-reading.html> accessed on 19/06/2013.

Poverty of the Religious and the Religiousness of Poverty

Selva Rathinam

“There was a peasant who left his good land and home to go to the South, where he had heard there were thousands of fertile acres for the asking. He made his way to the nomad tribe and asked for some of their land. The chieftain told him he could claim as his own the amount of land he could encompass on foot, from sunup to sundown. When he had rested from his journey he set out running at a pace he felt he could sustain, for he had great confidence in his own strength and endurance, and began to stake out his land. But his greed was greater than his endurance, so his strength began to give out towards the close of the day. By the time he had run the immense boundaries he had chosen for himself, he fell dead at the feet of the Cossack chieftain. He ended in a sex-foot grave dug merrily by his scornful hosts, who sensed that the earth was the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” Tolstoi’s story called “How Much Land Does A Man Need?”

As the title indicates in this essay I pay attention to two main topics: poverty of the religious and the religiousness of poverty. It is the reflection of Sandra Schneiders on poverty in her insightful book ‘New Wineskins’ that gives me a lead to the first topic. The second topic takes its cue from the reflection of Pope Francis on the true meaning of Christian poverty.

¹ See <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=560> accessed on 19/06/2013.

Poverty of the Religious

In the Catholic Christian life in general and in religious life in particular poverty is very much emphasized. There are multiple instances where the individuals made heroic choices for solidarity with the poor, the congregations divested themselves of corporate holdings and the communities supported the individuals who renounced lucrative apostolate in favour of ministries among the poor. Therefore it is important to understand why poverty is valued so greatly.

Poverty is an analogous term. It can mean different things to different people. When we say a poor man, a poor soul, a poor idea, a poor joke, a poor taste and a poor excuse we do not have the same meaning of 'poor'. Poverty is a term used of a number of realities with the meaning of somewhat same and of somewhat different. Although secondary analogues could point to the quality of insufficiency, lack or defect whether it is material, spiritual, literal or figurative, the primary analogue is the economic one pointing to the lack of sufficient material goods. If so, what about the 'poverty of spirit'? Is it an analogue of poverty? The 'Poverty of spirit' is not a defect but a virtue pointing to the proper disposition of a person before God. If so, how is spiritual poverty related to primary or secondary analogues?

Phenomenologically poverty is 'insufficiency'. It is not having enough basic necessities of life like food, clothing and shelter. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31) the poor Lazarus is poor because he did not have food for he was waiting for the food that falls from the master's table, he did not have clothing for he didn't even have the bandage so the dogs were licking his open wounds, he did not have shelter for he was standing at the gate of the house of the rich man. In the very same parable the rich man was rich because he had food for he was eating sumptuously every day, he had clothing for he was wearing linen clothes, and he had shelter for he had a house which even had a gate. The consequences of such material poverty is poor health, inadequate medical care, low energy, no time except for survival activity, little or no education or cultural development and finally lack of options. Thus, material poverty involves insufficiency without having

enough of what is necessary for a meaningful human existence. If so, poverty in terms of its primary analogue, that is material poverty, is evil. On the contrary, everything should be done to alleviate and abolish such dehumanizing poverty with all its concomitants like intellectual, spiritual and social poverty. In such circumstances how does poverty become a religious virtue?

Surveying the history of religious life one comes to realize that it is not the enforced poverty but the voluntary poverty which can become an aid to spiritual quest. This voluntary or chosen poverty is a relative lack of this world's goods but is not genuine insufficiency with regard to essentials. In the first three centuries of Common Era the virgins and widows led a very simple life but were provided adequately by the early Christian communities. In the fourth and fifth centuries the desert monks sought a life as devoid of material supports as possible but not without the necessities of life. In the sixth century the monks and nuns of the first Benedictine monasteries had a very different conception of poverty. The individual monks had nothing of their own but the monastery was a prosperous economic unit that provided comfortably for its members. In the middle ages the mendicants decided on a corporate form of poverty in which the order possessed no holdings and therefore the individual religious had to live by begging or by work. Modeled on Jesus the itinerant preachers were not in dire want. The apostolic orders founded in the sixteenth and following centuries worked out combinations of corporate possession and personal non-possession in order to pursue their apostolic activities in efficient ways. "In various circumstances throughout history individual religious or religious groups did indeed suffer want. But this was never the object of the vow of poverty and it was always a situation which the religious tried to remedy by begging, by work, or by careful handling of resources. In short, whatever the object of the vow of poverty was, it was not poverty in the primary and proper sense of the word: insufficiency."² Therefore, poverty in religious life is used relatively and not literally. In other words, in religious poverty there is a distance between the religious and the wealth pole of the material scale and here the religious

² S.M. Schneiders, *New Wineskins: Re-imagining Religious Life Today* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 172.

approximate the poverty pole without, however, lacking at least the bare necessities of life. "Wealth is nowhere in the Gospels denoted as evil. Jesus says it is dangerous in that it makes entrance in the reign of God difficult, but he does not say that it is evil. On the other hand, there is no question but that poverty is evil."³

The two parables in the gospel of Luke teach us the dangers of the riches: one is the parable of the rich fool (Lk 12:13-21) and the other the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31). In the first one when the rich man said to himself gathering the grain in his barn, "Oh, my soul, eat and make merry for what all you want is here in the barn". God told him in the dream, "you, fool, to whom are all these things going to belong, for tonight I will take your soul." Now why did God call him a fool? Psalm 14:1 says that it is the fool who tells within his heart that there is no God. Here the rich man depended totally on his wealth rather than on God. Therefore the danger of the riches is that it can make one 'godless'. Similarly in the second parable both the rich man and the poor Lazarus died. The rich man went to the hell and the poor to the heaven. Why? What was the sin committed by the rich man? There is no indication that he has ever broken any commandment. The sin of the rich man is that he did not open his heart to the poor who was at his door. Thus, the danger of riches is that it can make one heartless! God, so they say, lives in the highest heaven and has the humblest heart. If one has neither God nor heart in his/her life, he/she is doomed forever. If wealth is only dangerous but poverty is evil why then did religious prefer to approximate a true evil, poverty, rather than a dangerous good, wealth?

Wealth used for oneself leads to various forms of luxury or "soft living" like too much of eating, drinking and sleeping (these three often go together), sexual excess, addictive habits and in short, all the elements of luxurious life style. Therefore, the people who are serious about their spiritual life embraced an ascetical lifestyle which, to the luxurious, appears "poor". Of course today we will be cautious to say that what is suitable for the 21st century apostolic religious is 'simple lifestyle' and not some of the extreme physical deprivations of the early desert monks. Part of this religious poverty is the renunciation of individual and private

³ S.M. Schneiders, *New Wineskins*, 172-173.

ownership. To hold material goods in common immediately eliminates the basic cause of social division. Such sharing not only makes for peace and unity in the religious community but also disposes the community for love and care of those outside the community and it leads to the virtue of hospitality. As Abraham entertained the angels unawares in his hospitality so the Christian communities welcome Christ in the strangers. That is why the gradual suppression of this religious virtue of hospitality in favour of cloistered exclusiveness was seriously questioned in recent years.⁶ Since the religious were not hoarding their goods in order to become wealthy they could afford to share whatever they had with those who had less through almsgiving and care of the needy especially in times of social disaster. Such sharing extended not only to material goods but to their prayer life, their learning, their cultural achievements and their spiritual wisdom. Thus, the kind of poverty which the religious embraced was calculated to prevent both the dangers of wealth and the evil of real poverty.

In the Old Testament we have the spirituality of poverty which the scholars describe as the spirituality of the *anawim*, the 'poor of Yahweh.' The poor in the Old Testament are not romanticized nor was poverty glorified or proposed as ideal. But what the Old Testament writers came to recognize about the poor was that they, unlike the rich and the comfortable were forced in a sense to choose between complete despair and dependence on God which was the attitude God sought in all the people of the covenant. For the well-off, God was a God of the gaps. But for the really poor life was nothing but gaps. They were the poor, the empty, the lowly whom God alone could fill, exalt and satisfy. In the New Testament Jesus evoked this spirituality of the *anawim* as the Christian ideal. "Blessed are you poor.... (Lk 6:20); "Unless you turn and become like children you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 18:3); "I have not come for the righteous but for sinners" (Mt 9:13). Essentially all mean the same. It is the reversal of original sin which is the desire to be our own God. This is the most basic conversion of all, the total acceptance of creaturehood in the face of God's Greater-Love. Jesus says that this attitude requires a conversion. It is not the case that one must be actually poor, that is, materially destitute, morally bankrupt, spiritually powerless. Job in the Old Testament was a man

who had everything but who never lost sight of the truth that all his blessings were from God who retained the right to withdraw it all at any time and without explanation. The officer in the gospel whose son (servant) Jesus cured was well off but possessed openness to God that amazed even Jesus. Mary, whom Luke canonizes as the New Testament embodiment of *anawim* spirituality by placing the Magnificat on her lips in response to God's greatest gift, was not homeless or starving. Jesus himself was not materially destitute. Therefore, Matthew amended the first beatitude to read: poor in spirit (Mt 5:3). Material goods are not evil. All creation is good. Wealth is not evil but it is dangerous because it entices to luxury, divides us from our neighbours, leads us to self-sufficiency which closes us to the infinite saving love of God. Since poverty is an evil its victims cry out to God for salvation. Thus, there is spiritual wisdom in choosing a condition close enough to poverty to ward off the danger of wealth and acknowledges our true condition as creatures crying out to the God of our salvation with the authenticity that comes from actually experienced neediness. This is the poverty that religious seek: not destitution, for to seek such would be to tempt God as well as to abandon our responsibility for ourselves and needlessly to burden our sisters and brothers; but a relative poverty that enables us to experience our creaturehood in all its starkness in order that we might be disposed to accept God's saving love and to extend it to others.

The Religiousness of Poverty

After being elected pope, Jorge Bergoglio underscored the theme of his papacy: "How I long for a poor Church for the poor!" Very many understood this statement as the agenda set by Pope Francis for the Catholic Church, namely, poverty-alleviation. This may be true in one sense but this is not all. Perhaps, Pope Francis wants us to understand a deeper meaning of Christian poverty, going far deeper than poverty-alleviation, which we should never miss.

Pope Francis comes from Latin America which is largely a land of dire poverty. It is natural for him to be disturbed by the material poverty of that land and be vocal about it. Option for the poor is not optional for any serious believer in Christ. Yet, Pope Francis' understanding of poverty is not restricted to the secular understanding of material poverty but it goes far beyond it.

In the question-and-answer session which the members of the new movements had with Pope Francis on Pentecost eve in 2013 the pope expressed his views on Christian poverty.⁴ Poverty, for us Christians, according to him is not a sociological, philosophical or cultural category but it is a theological category. It is the poverty of the flesh of Christ. What does he mean by this? It is the poverty that the Son of God brought us with His incarnation. God, the Son of God, abased Himself, made Himself poor to accompany us. A poor Church for the poor begins by going to the flesh of Christ. Thus, we understand what this Christian poverty is when we go to the flesh of Christ, the poverty of the Lord. In one word, it's about 'humility'. Jesus' *kenosis* (emptying) for us out of mercy and love began at the incarnation and culminated upon the cross. It has two dimensions: dying to oneself and reaching out to others. Jesus emptied himself in humility and reached out to us in mercy. This is illuminated in the Greek word used by Matthew (5:3) to describe the "poor in spirit" (*ptochos*). Poor (*ptochos*) means being reduced to a beggar. We, the Church, whether poor, middle-class or wealthy, are called to be poor in spirit by recognizing our sins and begging Christ in humility to save us. This is the first dimension of what it means to be a poor Church. The humility here consists in the utter surrender with which one freely submits to Christ as the only one who can save us. There is also another dimension to this poverty, that is, reaching out to others in mercy and love believing that in the face of the poor we see the face of Christ. Pope Francis posed two questions to his audience while developing this argument: "Tell me, when you give alms do you look into the eyes of the man or woman to whom you give alms?... And when you give alms, do you touch the hand of the one to whom you give alms, or do you toss the coin?" Thus, Pope Francis' understanding of poverty is primarily with reference to the fact that the Second Person of the Trinity humbled Himself by taking on human form in the incarnation and sacrificed Himself for humankind by dying on the Cross. Here 'humility' is not associated with the popular meaning, that is, a humble person is weak, passive and subservient but on the contrary 'humility' here is solidarity with the humiliated as by self-abasement God enters into solidarity with the

⁴ See <http://www.acton.org/pub/commentary/2013/06/19/pope-francis-true-meaning-poverty>

humiliated. Thus, Pope Francis insisted on that Pentecost Vigil that “the Church is not a political movement, or a well-organized structure.... We’re not an NGO, and when the Church becomes an NGO she loses salt, has no flavor, is only an empty organization.”

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Hoping for Justice in a World of Economic Injustice

Reflections on the concept of the Other in Emmanuel Levinas

Nishant A. Irudayadason

Introduction

Poverty is undesirable. It needs to be eradicated. The cry of the poor or to use a better term, the impoverished, must make us critique the unjust structure that impoverishes them. I deliberately choose to use the word impoverished for the simple reason that people are poor because they are made to be poor. In this sense, poverty is human-made. If poverty is the invention of a self-vested minority by constructing an economic structure that results in the wide gulf between the rich and the poor, deconstructing it is the task of the socially committed people. While the socially privileged minority is keen on an economic edifice that is necessarily oppressive, the vast majority of the human race, the socially committed intellectuals must try hard and subvert it. Is such an adventure possible? Is it merely a hopeless utopia? For this very reason, I choose to study the issue of economic poverty, from a liberative perspective, though there are many other human issues clamouring for our attention today.

Recent study shows that the world resources are in surplus and the heart of the problem lies in the distribution of the wealth. The world resources are monopolized and are concentrated in the hands of the few. The poor nations are poor not because these nations are full of the idle lazy flotsam of humanity but because rich nations deprive them of their share. Thus the world is not a lifeboat but

rather an ocean liner. This too is in danger of sinking, not because the hordes of hungry passengers cling on to it, but because the first-class passengers carry with them more than what they need. The real cause of poverty is not so much overpopulation as the affluence of the rich – over-consumption, military spending, global waste, poor design and the like. There is something basically wrong with the production and the distribution system, the economic structure itself.

Reasons for Poverty: A Critical Look

An oft-cited reason for hunger and poverty in the developing countries is explosion of population. If the population growth is controlled, then prosperity is ensured. The underlying assumption is that the excessive population causes underdevelopment. This is how poverty is normally accounted for. Dr. Ehrlich, a well-known American ecologist and overpopulation theorist, in his book, *The Population Bomb* states: "The battle to feed all humanity is over... The birth-rate must be brought into balance with the death rate, or mankind will breed itself into oblivion. We can no longer afford merely to treat the symptoms of the cancer of population growth; the cancer itself must be cut out. Population control is the only answer."¹ Thomas Malthus, the founder of the overpopulation theory, believed that Europe was overpopulated and that the poor had only themselves to blame for their misery. He recommended that the role of the State was to "leave the poor to their fate, at most making death easy for them." Well-known ethicist Garret Hardin offers a similar solution today: "How can we help a foreign country to escape overpopulation? Clearly the worst thing we do is to send food. The child who is saved today becomes a breeder tomorrow. We send food out of compassion, but if we desired to increase the misery in an overpopulated nation, could we find a more effective way of doing so? Atomic bombs would be kinder."² Hardin justifies such brutality on the basis of lifeboat ethics.

¹ Paul R. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), xi.

² Cited by Andrew Feenberg, *Questioning Technology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 51-52.

If poverty is viewed exclusively as a result of overpopulation, how can one account for those hoarding more than what they need, living next door to those in wretched poverty? The real problem is something deeper. In fact, it is more fitting to speak of poverty as caused by rapid population growth than its cause. Many people want to have more children because it means more human resources contributing to economical survival. "Until changes in a nation's economic and social structures make having small families viable, birth control for many poor people is tantamount to economic suicide."³ People flock to the cities, not so much because the rural areas are overpopulated, as due to the lack of job opportunities in villages. The real issue that needs attention first is developmental priorities, rather than population growth. The real cause of poverty is not population growth, though it may be an additional factor. Nelson calls us to distinguish between overpopulation, surplus population and rapid growth of population. By overpopulation is meant that the population is so much that production cannot be distributed to all to meet their basic needs. The affluence of the few reveals that overpopulation is not a reality. Surplus population would mean people are no longer needed to participate in the task of production, as machines replace them in large industrial sector. Rapid population growth is the rate of increase in population especially in the poor countries. This, of course, is a very serious problem and must be attended to. The reasons must be studied carefully and viable economical and ethical solutions must be worked out.

One of the reasons for poverty is the market economic system that is deliberately based on waste. It is essentially the direct opposite of what an ecological production and distributive system might be. It collides with the environment and the needs of the world's poor. Advertisements are directed to capture people's attention and to set their hearts on consuming new and the latest commodities. Using old-fashioned, though durable, goods would mean being out-dated and not leading a life of high standard. Planned obsolescence creates products that are designed to fall apart and need early replacement. Each year new technologies, many of which are far more polluting than the technologies they have

³Jack A. Nelson, *Hunger for Justice: The Politics of Food and Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1980), 104.

replaced, are causing our environment to deteriorate faster than our production has increased. Engineers and industrial designers concentrate their efforts on gimmicks and style changes rather than durability, dependability and safe use.

The problem lies at the heart of production system. The production system is very much based on the anti-durability principle. The goods are so poorly designed that they would not last long. The poor design is not because of lack of skill or modern technology but deliberate, to sustain the market economy based on waste. Another technique often used by such industrial companies is to stop producing certain replaceable spare parts and thus consumers are forced to go in for a new product altogether. Another strategy is to get the consumers use disposable goods such as plastic utensils, paper towels etc. Yet another is that of outmoding. New models, in terms of attractive appearances and colour combinations, are introduced just to outdate former models. Ironically, human intelligence is used to produce inferior goods. It is shocking to know that these poorly designed unsafe goods involve risking the lives of those who use them. Victor Papanek decries this terrible waste of talent: "By designing criminally unsafe automobiles that kill or maim nearly one million people around the world each year, by creating a whole series of permanent garbage to clutter up the landscape, and by choosing materials and processes that pollute the air we breathe, designers have become a dangerous breed."⁴

Ecological problems are directly related to poverty issues. There are people who discard the problems of pollution as a price we need to pay for human development and technological advancement. When such people speak of human development they, in fact, refer to the cream of the society who profit from all such technological advancements while those who pay price for it are the poor who cannot afford to protect themselves against pollution. Hence the problem, from a liberationist perspective, is not merely the fact of pollution but the injustice embedded in it: the poor paying price affluence of the rich. Secondly, the poor

⁴ Victor Papanek, *Design for the Real World* (New York: PantheonBooks, 1971), xxi. for a critique see Victor Margolin, "Design for a Sustainable World," *Design Issues*, vol. 14, no. 2 (1998): 83-92.

majority of the developing countries are in a way forced to accept pollution as a necessary evil of being employed in industries that assure them of their daily bread. The relatedness between poverty and environmental crisis is well articulated by Drimmelen in his *Faith in Global Economy*.

The economic deprivation and ecological degradation, which characterize unqualified economic growth, are in fact two sides of the same coin. This is reflected in the disproportionate ways in which poor people suffer from environmental destruction. Often they live close to polluted areas, in inadequate housing with poor sanitation; as peasants they often possess poor, degraded and arid land; as landless agricultural workers they often have to work with toxic insecticides, pesticides and herbicides; their health is often endangered by polluted drinking water and fishing water. Poor women have extra burdens as they have to walk longer distances to find clean water and wood for fuel.⁵

Pollution and industrialization seem to be co-extensive. The more we produce, the more factories we erect, the more we subject ourselves to dangers of a low life expectancy. Our industrial wastes may poison us long before we run out of copper and cobalt. If industrial waste can harm environment to such an extent, how much more could the environmental destruction be, with the misuse of nuclear power? "The danger posed by nuclear plants does not stop with the potential for a meltdown. The waste that each of these plants produces each year is highly dangerous, and may have to be stored safely for three hundred thousand years until its radioactivity dissipates."⁶ In fact, though atomic power production is still in its infancy, deadly nuclear wastes have been accumulated all over the world and yet no safe disposal site has been found so far. Should we continue to hope in the promise of technology to dispose of these wastes safely, while we are marching towards the grave swiftly?

⁵Rob van Drimmelen and D.Preman Niles, *Faith in Global Economy: A Primer for Christians* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), 119.

⁶ Adam Daniel Corson-Finnerty, *World Citizen: Action for Global Justice* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1982), 39.

Are we biased against the use of technology and blindly oppose it? Do we out rightly and categorically deny digging up mountains for coal, generating electric powers from rivers and saving crops by using pesticides? I think not. What we are basically concerned with is the uncontrolled use of technology. People engage themselves in environmentally damaging activities to profit more from the uncontrolled use of technology. Heightened awareness of the pollution crisis alone would not suffice. It is imperative that we look forward to an alternative technology. Amori Lovins makes a distinction between the hard and soft paths to energy sufficiency. The hard path, according to him, is built on nuclear plants, devastating use of natural resources such as coal, oil and gas, paving the way for pollution and concentrated power to the industrial government military elite. On the other hand, the soft path has as its axis inexhaustible resources such as the sun, the wind and the vegetation. It does not involve huge investments, inaccessible experts and centralized decision-making, thus leaving room for flexibility, cleanliness and democracy. Lovins suggests that the energy path we choose will determine much of the future shape and quality of our life – not just in terms of pollution, but in the very makeup and organization of our communities and our political structures.

Drimmelen rightly assets, “poverty is polluting just as overconsumption is. To survive, poor people often have little chance but to overuse and destroy their natural environment. This, in turn, aggravates poverty... Combating poverty is thus as important a requirement for safeguarding the environment as promoting less wasteful consumption by those who are materially well off.”⁷ It is rightly said that the world has enough for everyone’s need and not for anyone’s greed. The natural resources of the world are not infinite; they are limited. If the consumption rate of the affluent continues this way, it would exhaust some of the resources in the next few years.

Military spending is an added reason for aggravating poverty. It is quite paradoxical that most nations spend a huge amount in equipping the army with the latest technological arms to kill one another while people actually die of hunger. The justification for such disproportionate

⁷ Drimmelen and Niles, *Faith in Global Economy*, 120.

spending on military, in the name of defending people, is only a mockery when people are not defended against hunger and poverty. Most of the natural wealth including steel, copper, iron, electricity, petroleum and many other resources are extravagantly used in the production of military equipment. If only these resources are used to improvise agricultural machinery, medical and educational tools, the death of poverty can be assured. Worse still is the scary situation where human energy and thinking are used to wage war and to kill people rather than alleviating poverty and positively building up humanity. If only human talents are pooled together to improve the living conditions of the people, the world can have a human face.

In addition to the terrible waste of world resources and brain power that is sunk into the arms race – money and time that could be infinitely better used to solve the world’s real problems – the developing is also suffering because it is increasingly being encouraged to arm by the competing superpowers, and by greedy arms merchants. “Once produced, weapons are often used to reinforce unjust political and economic structures in poor countries.”⁸ The sad aspect of arms sales to the developing countries is that these countries cannot in any way afford the luxuries of a modern armed force. Some countries are drawn into military purchases because their neighbours are arming themselves. Some are forced into such purchases by their own local military elites who want to be able to acquire prestige by possessing sophisticated armaments. Still others are drawn in because of the backdoor bribes that are available for compliant politicians.

Need for Global Redesign

Global redesign must prioritize the physical needs of the world’s people - food, clean water, health, shelter etc. Thus global redesign requires the following: (a) to distribute resources to the areas of the greatest need; (b) the rich nations must share their technology, their talent, their material wealth with the poor nations; (c) the rich nations must adopt a policy of “selective growth” which means a shift from the production of consumer

⁸ Nelson, *Hunger for Justice*, 56.

goods to “service economy”; (d) the poor nations must adopt a policy of “balanced growth” which means an emphasis on self-sufficiency and “appropriate technology.”⁹

In short, global redesign is possible only if people, as individuals, strive to lead a just standard of living and nations aim at producing and distributing a just national product. Leading a just standard of living has two dimensions – personal and social. The personal dimension has been insisted on all along in religious life, namely the need to be detached from worldly possessions for the sake of one’s own liberation, for the well-being of one’s own personhood. The social dimension aims at a wider scope, that is, for the sake of others to meet their basic needs. The awareness that world’s resources are not infinite should urge us not to consume more than our fair share. “What I consume relates directly to what is available for others; if I consume more than my fair share, I am literally taking food from the mouth of others, clothes from their bodies... Living a God-centred life in the social dimension also means, then, that we must stop destroying our wildlife and polluting the earth’s water and its atmosphere.”¹⁰

While the just standard of living is addressed to individuals, the just national product is addressed to the nations. This means that every nation must use the world resources in a proportionate manner especially as we begin to realize more and more that the globe is a closed system with limited resources. We are part of the global village and an affluent life style of one or a few nations should not deprive other nations of their legitimate share. This is very much applicable in today’s world where the gulf between the developed and the developing countries is increasingly widening. Working out strategies to promote a just national product alone will pave to construct a new economic order based on justice.

It may seem that the middle class are the beneficiaries of the present economic system, consuming a disproportionate share in the world’s

⁹ Corson-Finnerty uses this expression to mean technology that is geared to the development of all, not only a portion of people.

¹⁰ Adam Daniel Corson-Finnerty, *No More Plastic Jesus: Global Justice and Christian Lifestyl* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1977), 109.

resources. But they themselves have no control over the economic system; they are caught up in its grip. The real fact is that the middle class is not middle class at all. They can rightly be called middle-income workers. For Marx, the term middle-class represented those who owned a means of production but on a small-scale; they do not have to work for others. But often what we mean by middle class is middle-income workers. They are very much part of the working class and, like the poor, they are at the mercy of the dominant institutional economic structure, except for the fact that their physical lot is far better than the poor. The economic structure is controlled by a handful of the rich whose unrestrained pursuit of continued profits and dividends is going to bring us all to ruin.

The middle-income workers of the industrialized society according to the Belgian, Ernest Mandel, represent a new working class. This new working class, often known as white-collar workers includes engineers, health professionals, social workers, clerical workers and so on. They are not different from the old working class or the blue-collar workers, except that they are more educated and better paid. The new working class is nothing more than a new part of Marx's proletariat as they work for wages in large institutions, which they do not own or control. They are capable of bringing out a revolution because they are capable of understanding the contradiction involved in the production-distribution system and are capable of managing the affairs of production without having the rich to decide how to use the resources.

Charles Reich, the author of *The Greening of America* believes that there is only one class – the proletariat ruled by the machine. His contention that 'nobody' runs the machine is naive over-simplistic. His insight is valid only in so far as it reveals an important truth – that "all of *us* are at the mercy of the system that makes *us* work for *it*, rather than the other way around."¹¹ But not all are proletariat in the same sense – namely there are some who profit more by the system and others oppressed more by the same system.

¹¹ Corson-Finnerty, *No More Plastic Jesus*, 86.

The new working class, though they tend to classify themselves as the middle class and to adopt a life-style of the upper class, has a social position, that is nothing beyond the status of the proletariat. The student's revolt in France in May 1968 was a clear reaction to colleges functioning merely as training centres for a new working class to be at the service of the economic system responsible for disparity in the socio-economic status. Linked with this, is the problem of unemployment in developed countries. More qualified people are trained than employed. While job opportunities for young qualified people become increasingly rare on one hand, the middle-aged workers become expendable long before their productive life is over on the other. The simple fact is that the new working class is in surplus. Jeremin Rifkin predicts:

We are rapidly approaching a historic crossroads in human history. Global corporations are now capable of producing an unprecedented volume of goods and services with ever smaller workforce. The new technologies are bringing us into an era of near workerless production at the very moment in the world history when population is surging to unprecedented levels. The clash between rising population pressures and falling job opportunities will shape the geopolitics of the emerging high-tech global economy well into the next century.¹²

Unless efforts to reorganize the present economy take place, the qualified white-collar workers will face job insecurity and expendability as was the case of blue-collar workers for years. This crisis of job insecurity paves way to the realization of the middle-income workers to become more aware of their status of proletariat by shaking off their "middle-class" identification. The gap between the white-collar and the blue-collar workers is gradually bridged. They together form a new working class in the modern capitalism.

Development is possible only by making choices. Whose interests will our developmental efforts cater to: those of the already privileged or the needs of the world's poor? This is the choice we will have to

¹² Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work: the Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era* (New York: Tarcher, 1996), 207.

make. Nelson points out “global hunger and poverty testify to the fact that most nations ... have sought to develop for the benefit of the already privileged.”¹³ This is prone to be the case, unless we start working out strategies for development through self-reliance. He sees self-reliance as “the only road if one defines development in terms of meeting basic human needs, including adequate food, clothing, shelter, health care and employment, and if one includes also a diversity of culture and the right to participate in decisions that affect one’s life.”¹⁴

Levinas Thinker of Justice

Levinas says, “Justice is awakened by charity, but the charity that is before justice is also after [justice]. . . . It is necessary that I rediscover the unique, once I have judged the thing; each time anew, and each time as a living individual and as a unique individual who can find, in his very uniqueness, what a general consideration cannot find.”¹⁵ The task of “rediscovering” the uniqueness of the Other is reserved for philosophy. This is not merely one area of philosophical inquiry among others, for example, epistemology, logic, and aesthetics. Rather, it changes the very meaning of philosophy insofar as it transforms the thinker’s vocation from the search for truth to the search for a better justice. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas writes: “Philosophy serves justice by thematizing the difference and reducing the thematized to difference. It brings equity into the abnegation of the one for the other, justice into responsibility.”¹⁶ This “reduction” of philosophy by philosophy constitutes “an incessant unsaying [dédire] of the said [le dit]”¹⁷ or an “endless critique” of its own ontological language, which is incapable of saying the identity of the other without distortion and violence, and which thus remains to be

¹³ Nelson, *Hunger for Justice*, 160.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Jill Robbins (ed.), *Is It Righteous to Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 52.

¹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being: Or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 165.

¹⁷ Ibid., 181.

“unsaid” or retracted in turn if the difference or what Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* called “separation”¹⁸ between me and the Other is to be maintained.

In the concrete, this amounts to the continual re-examination, revision, and amendment of existing governmental policies, political and judicial procedures, laws, statutes, and institutions conforming to the liberal State. While Levinas confesses to a Platonic or “a utopian moment” in his thinking here, one that is governed by ideal of a polis that “holds justice as the absolutely desirable end and hence as a perfection”, he also considers it obvious that “a liberal state is more moral than a fascist state, and closer to the morally ideal state”¹⁹ inasmuch as it is presided over by “the consciousness that the justice on which the State is founded is, at this moment, still an imperfect justice.”²⁰ The liberal State is thus said to have within it “an institution that is not of the State.”²¹ Such is the surplus of ethics qua charity that founds the just State and counteracts its tendency to become Stalinist or totalitarian. Levinas asserts that “in the State where laws function in their generality, where verdicts are pronounced out of a concern for universality, once justice is said there is still, for the person as unique and responsible one, the possibility of or appeal to something that will reconsider the rigor of this always rigorous justice. To soften this justice, to listen to the personal appeal, is each person’s role. It is in that sense that one has to speak of a return to charity and mercy. Charity is a Christian term, but it is also a general biblical term: the word *hesed* signifies precisely charity or mercy.”²²

¹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 102.

¹⁹ Tamra Wright, Alison Ainley, and Peter Hughes, “The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas,” (168-80), in Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (eds.), *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other* (London: Routledge, 2002), 177-78.

²⁰ Robbins (ed.), *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 68.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 67-68.

Needless to say, charity here does not simply cancel or annul the justice it “arouses”. It follows justice, which becomes perverted without it. Justice, Levinas says, is about the relation with the Other. In discussing this relation, which is “outside the dichotomies valid for things”, “the a priori and the a posteriori”, outside the “ineradicable conviction of every philosophy that objective knowledge is the ultimate relation of transcendence... justice, the preeminent transcendence and the condition for knowing is [not] a noesis correlation of a noema (as Husserl might have it).”²³ We do not constitute the Other, put it under categories or comprehend its Being, as philosophers such as Husserl, Kant or Heidegger might suggest. This would be to treat it as ‘the same’, rather than as ‘other’. Rather, in Levinas, we have the concept of justice, which is one of relationship, as the condition for knowing the Other.

From this position of ‘justice as the condition for knowing the Other’, Levinas makes a complex argument relating justice to truth and relating these to objective knowledge, which is related to subjectivity, freedom and desire, thence to discourse and the welcome therein to ‘the face’ of the Other, until we come to the point where the welcome of the face of the Other is justice. How then does the desire for the Other call my freedom into question? It is through ‘the face’ – “the way the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*.”²⁴ The face of the Other is not a representation, or an adequate idea or a disclosure of Being; it “expresses itself” in discourse or conversation which “at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it”. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I... to have the idea of infinity. To receive is to be taught – the Other is wholly other – not something that I have an idea of that is awakened by my encounter with him, not something that comes from myself but from beyond me and therefore a ‘non-allergic’ which implies – ethical – relation. It is not something I constitute through intentionality into ‘the same’ – as I can do with other objects such as the bread I eat or the home I live in. The face of the Other is ‘eruptive’, it disturbs the ‘happiness’ and ‘enjoyment’ of the I ‘at home with itself’ where ‘I can’. But in welcoming

²³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 89.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

the Other, I do not lose or lessen my own identity; the Other is not the 'they' of Heidegger who takes me away from my own authenticity, nor the reciprocal 'I-Thou' relationship of Buber, but the desire for infinity which is also the desire for the Good; there is a moral dimension to all of this therefore. The face is that which demands a response as ultimately it is a call from infinity, from a dimension of Height.

The Other reveals himself to me and challenges me; when I respond in welcome to this challenge in the face-to-face encounter, this is an ethical response. Because he challenges me, I may wish to destroy, even murder him, but because his call is from Infinity (and therefore from the Good), I am responsible for him and cannot ethically commit murder. In this sense my powers are "paralysed" by the Other. The face is the face of the destitute and the poor which not only addresses me, but also exhorts me, through the 'third party' of the whole of humanity who is also present at our encounters to 'sermon, exhortation, the prophetic word'; later he says that "the face summons me to my obligations and judges me" and whose "inviolable exteriority the face states in uttering 'you shall not commit murder': the essence of discourse is ethical."²⁵

Levinas holds that "the infinity of responsibility denotes not its actual immensity, but a responsibility increasing in the measure that it is assumed: duties become greater in the measure that they are accomplished."²⁶ Later on, he says, "justice summons me to go beyond the straight line of justice... beyond the straight line of the law the land of goodness extends infinite and unexplored, necessitating all the resources of a singular presence. I am therefore necessary for justice, as responsible beyond every limit fixed by an objective law."²⁷ On the one hand it appears that it is on my state of responsible singularity upon which the whole concept of justice is founded as "justice would not be possible without [that] singularity" but he also refers to "a system of justice of universal law" which I, though the reason for its very foundation, must go beyond: "Beyond the system of justice of universal law, the I enters under

²⁵ Ibid., 215-16.

²⁶ Ibid., 245.

²⁷ Ibid.

judgment by the fact of being good. Goodness consists in taking up the position in being such that the Other counts more than myself.”²⁸ Ethics for Levinas is not a matter of following the letter or spirit of the law, not a matter of equality or reciprocity. The relationship between the I and the Other is asymmetrical.

In an interview that took place at the time of the Klaus Barbie trial (1987), Levinas recalled a question that Jean-Toussaint Desanti had once asked a young Japanese student who was writing on his (Levinas’s) ethics. The question was whether “an SS officer has what I call a face”. Levinas replied: “a very troubling question that calls, to my mind, for an affirmative answer. An affirmative answer that is painful every time!”²⁹ The fact that the members of the SS have “a right to a defence and respect [droit à une défense, à des egards]”, a right that they absolutely refused to extend to their victims, explains why there are no easy replies at this moment, why Levinas’s response is – in a manner reminiscent of Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov* – so “painful.”³⁰ So how does Levinas justify punishing and repressing the face – for example, the face of Klaus Barbie? Does not the heavy premium he places on the face preclude the possibility of justice altogether? In a short article written against the death penalty entitled “An Eye for an Eye” (1963), appearing two years after the publication of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas appeared to concede everything to the pacifist camp when he wrote, “violence calls up violence, but we must put a stop to this chain reaction.”³¹ If violence only gives rise to more violence, how can it rightly be called “just”, precisely defined in terms the struggle against violence?

Levinas doesn’t always claim that violence gives rise to violence. Indeed, in “Judaism and Revolution”, a Talmudic lecture given in 1969, he argued that violence is unavoidable in some cases. “Unquestionably”,

²⁸ Ibid., 247.

²⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, “A quoi pensent les philosophes?” (53-60), *Autrement*, vol. 102 (1988): 59 (translation mine).

³⁰ For the character Alyosha’s remark about suffering, see Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (London: Penguin Books, 1958), 283.

³¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 147.

he said, "violent action against Evil is necessary."³² Invoking the authority of Rabbi Eleazar, he wrote: "if I am violent it is because violence is needed to put an end to violence."³³ There can be no question of refusing violence outright. Not only is the doctrine of non-violence powerless to put an end to violence, it risks complicity in violence. In a polemical essay entitled "Simone Weil Against the Bible" (1952), written half way through the bloodiest century in history, Levinas wrote:

The doctrine of non-violence has not stemmed the natural course toward violence displayed by the whole world over the last two thousand years. . . . The extermination of evil by violence means that evil is taken seriously and that the possibility of infinite pardon tempts us to infinite evil. . . . It is precisely this inanity of charity – this resignation at the base of the most active charity, to the misfortune of the innocent – which is a contradiction. Love cannot overcome it, since it feeds off it. To overcome it we must act. . . . Life is not passion. It is an act. It is in history.³⁴

Not that Levinas is indifferent to the risk that violent action also presents in history. In "Judaism and Revolution", he made a point saying that "it is not only a question of seizing the evil-doer but also of not making the innocent suffer."³⁵ Even if we can agree on the justice of going to war (*jus ad bellum*), there is still the morality and legality of various actions performed in the course of waging war (*jus in bello*) to consider. In *Otherwise than Being*, we are told: "The true problem for us Westerners is not so much to refuse violence as to question ourselves about a struggle against violence which, without blanching in non-resistance to evil, could avoid the institution of violence out of this very struggle. Does not war perpetuate that which it is called on to make disappear, and consecrate war and its virile virtues in good conscience?"³⁶

³² Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1994), 109.

³³ *Ibid.*, 114.

³⁴ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 138-141.

³⁵ Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 110.

³⁶ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 177.

If violence is to avoid calling up more violence, if it is to put a stop to this chain reaction, then we must be patient. "In the just war waged against war", Levinas writes, "a relaxation of essence to the second degree is needed to tremble or shudder at every instant because of this very justice."³⁷ Only thus, according to Levinas, is it possible to feel an essential link which connects the spirit of patience to the true revolution. This revolution comes from great pity. The hand that grasps the weapon must suffer in the very violence of that gesture. To anaesthetize this pain brings the revolutionary to the frontiers of fascism.³⁸

Although pacifism is not an option when the Other is an aggressor, it is not something we can refuse in good conscience. Here, we find ourselves caught in a sort of Derridean "double-bind": if I fulfill my duty to the Other as much as is humanly possible, then I fail to do my duty to the third party as well as tempt "infinite evil". If, on the other hand, I discharge my obligations to the third party, I fail to do my duty to the Other and risk perpetuating evil by making the innocent suffer. It seems that whatever course of action I adopt I am in the wrong, caught in what logicians call a "constructive dilemma". Levinas accepts the soundness of the argument, and thus the impossibility of escaping between the horns of the dilemma. Violence is inevitable. The best one can hope for is to palliate the violence as much as possible. Such is the role assigned to charity after justice.

Conclusion

Can we render justice to the poor, especially since the unjust oppressive structure surmounts us like a huge cliff? True the reality is discouraging but not bleak altogether. We can choose between two approaches - to give up fighting against evil forces and leave the poor to their fate or to courageously encounter the scary situation and actively fight against it in a Levinasian fashion. Global change, to be realistic, will not happen overnight, perhaps not even in our own lifetime. But we can take the society we live in one step ahead, as Ambedkar did in his own life. It

³⁷Ibid., 185.

³⁸Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 155.

may even take generations to reconstruct a just global order and our contributions will add to this cumulative human effort. I would like to conclude my paper by quoting the Nobel Prize winner in economic sciences Amartya Sen, "I am hopeful about the future, it is because I see an increasingly vocal demand for democracy in the world and a growing understanding of the need for social justice... I am not unconditionally hopeful but conditionally so. We must, however, take a sufficiently broad view of poverty to make sure the poor have reason for hope."³⁹

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³⁹ Amartya Sen, <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~dludden/SenTimeMag.htm> (accessed 20 March 2014).

“Produce Fruits in Keeping with Repentance!”(Lk 3:8): Following up the Biblical Trail Towards the Ideal of a Poor Church

Thomas Malipurathu

1. The Church’s Battered Image

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of the “Jesus Movement” was that it always retained the image as a movement of the poor and the marginalized. Scholars who have subjected the relevant New Testament material to social-scientific analysis have shown how the lowly and the disinherited of Galilee and Judea were drawn to the movement Jesus spearheaded like iron filings to a magnet.¹ Jesus appeared on the scene as the champion of their cause and Palestine’s ubiquitous poor instantly recognized him as their authentic spokesperson wherever he went. This was in fact both the pride and the shame of the outfit. His followers largely took pride in the fact they finally had a movement that they could call their own, while his detractors targeted him for his indiscriminate association with the *hoi polloi*, the riff-raff and the undignified.

¹ The studies of scholars such as Gerd Theissen (*Sociology of the Early Palestinian Christianity* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978]), Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann, (*The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century* [Augsburg: Fortress Press, 1999]) and José Antonio Pagola (*Jesus, an Historical Approximation* [Miami: Convivium Press, 2009]) are particularly mentionable in this context.

The early Church continued in this assiduous adherence to the way of the poor, partly because its members mostly belonged to the lower strata of society and secondly because the inspiration provided by Jesus' own preferential option for the poor continued to impact his followers with undiminished intensity. His convictions on the matter Jesus expressed through the stirring manifesto pronounced in the synagogue at Nazareth at the very outset of his ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Lk 4:18-19). Throughout his ministry he carried out with relentless vigour the programme of action implied in that manifesto which clearly favoured those on the fringes of society and consequently beyond the pale of social and religious respectability. Not only that, at one moment, in a paroxysm of concern for the likes of them, he identified himself with them (Mt 25:31-46). Such unmistakable taking of sides could not have been missed by the NT writings, and some of them - the Gospel of Luke and the Letter of James in particular - have gone to great lengths to preserve that legacy for the edification of succeeding generations.

But for all we know, somewhere down the line the Church lost steam and stopped following the trail blazed by Jesus. Many think it had to do with what we are used to describing as the "conversion" of the Roman Emperor Constantine and the subsequent raising of Christianity to the status of the "state religion". As the Church started enjoying the privileges of political patronage, abuses began to creep in and people competed with one another to uncover new avenues in the pursuit of wanton luxury. In the remorseless jockeying for positions, possessions and power that became rampant among ecclesial functionaries, the loss of genuine Gospel values was the price that had to be paid. The Church's close association with Europe's feudal system of political governance inflicted the heaviest blow to its one-time image of being wedded to the cause of the poor. Charismatic figures like Francis of Assisi did try to conscientize the Church about this colossal loss of image, but their influence was short-lived. Subsequently through the overt and covert collaboration with the Western colonial enterprise in modern times the Church allowed its image to be further sullied in that it was seen as granting religious legitimacy to

the mindless plundering of unsuspecting peoples and nations. Thus the Church continued in its jingoistic triumphalism - even arrogantly projecting itself as the earthly replica of the kingdom of God - the feisty nudge of the Second Vatican Council and the persistent pleas of the Liberation theologians not with standing

That has been the itinerary traversed by the Church for centuries. But there are, mercifully, signs of some change in the offing, thanks largely to the incisive and transparent style of speaking of Pope Francis since his election as the head of the Church in early 2013 and the powerful impulses mediated through some of his symbolic gestures. His passionate avowal of a Church freed from the clutches of wealth, triumphalism and clericalism has been making waves within ecclesial forums and far beyond². Furthermore, going beyond what concerns the ad-intra life of the Church, he has also been forthright in condemning “the economy of exclusion and inequality” and “a financial system which rules rather than serves”³. He has had no qualms about pointing out the evils of today’s market-driven economy and the scathing criticism he frequently voices against the rise of consumerism has won much praise from people on both sides of the ideological divide.

It is, however, to be noted that a growing disaffection with the world’s dominant model of financial administration (which has for long been tacitly supported by the Christian churches and other organized religions) has been the subject matter of an intense debate for quite some time now. It reached a kind of crescendo particularly in the wake of the global economic crisis of 2007-2008. Many, including professionals in the field of financial administration, have begun to see that for our civilization to survive there is need for building up an alternative system of money and resource management. More pertinently perhaps, it also

² His vision of a different model for the functioning of the Church was made explicit even as late as 23 February 2014. While addressing the newly-created cardinals during a solemn Eucharistic Celebration held at St. Peter’s Basilica he said: “A cardinal enters the Church of Rome, not a royal court ... May all of us avoid, and help others to avoid, habits and ways of acting typical of a court: intrigue, gossip, cliques, favouritism and preferences.”

³ Cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 53 and 57.

is now increasingly accepted that there lies within the Christian tradition - and particularly in the biblical vision of life - immense resources for reflection and action when we set out in pursuit of a new world order. What this paper represents is a sketchy effort at analyzing one biblical passage to draw out some viable proposals for meaningful action in this context.

2. The Ministry of John the Baptist and the Message It Proposes (Lk 3:1-20)

John the Baptist is one of the biblical characters most Christians will consider as very familiar. Appreciation for him may stem from his role as the precursor of the Redeemer, or his ascetic way of life, his uncompromising adherence to truth or his well attested option to stay away from lime light. Despite being set on such a high pedestal, however, the Baptist's place in the Christian "moral economy" is rarely highlighted, much less elaborated. His relevance for our spiritual journey is mostly limited to the inspiration he offers us as the one who prepared the way of the Messiah. We are easily persuaded to see a convergence between his task as the Lord's forerunner and what is perceived as our own task as Christians.

2.1. The Role of John the Baptist

One finds remarkable consensus among the four evangelists in their portrayal of John the Baptist. All of them establish John's ministry as providing the occasion for that of Jesus; all four see him as a Jewish reform-preacher; in each Gospel the words of Isa 40:3 ("the voice of the one crying in the desert, 'Make ready the way of the Lord'") are used to present John's work. Furthermore, in all four Gospels John announces that he was administering a baptism of water foreshadowing a higher type of baptism that should come from someone mightier than himself⁴. Hence what we can assert with fair certainty is that the early Christian tradition embodied an easily recoverable conviction regarding the ministry of John the Baptist as providing the foundation for that of Jesus.

⁴ Cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian: Aspects of His Teaching* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989) 86-87.

There is also extracanonical evidence regarding the person of John the Baptist. This we find in the writings of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, who incidentally mentions also Jesus in his writings, although he does not link the two in any kind of relationship⁵. However, John's position as Jesus' forerunner or precursor is part of the common data shared by all four canonical Gospels.⁶

2.2. *The Life and Times of John the Baptist*

All four Gospels carry references to the life and work of John the Baptist. Nonetheless the Synoptics dominate in providing the details of his activity, preaching and death.⁷ In John's Gospel the focus is mostly on his mission as the one who prepares the ground for Jesus' own mission (cf. Jn 1:6, 15, 19-28, 29-34, 35-37; 3:22-30). Even among the Synoptic Gospels, the precise area of focus differs from one Gospel to the other. For instance, Mark offers a detailed description of the circumstances leading to John's confrontation with the tetrarch Herod and his subsequent martyrdom (cf. Mk 6:14-29), while Matthew gives an abridged version of it (cf. Mt 14:1-12) and Luke limits himself to cryptic references to his arrest, imprisonment and beheading (cf. Lk 3:19-20; 9:9). Similarly whereas the Marcan tradition is silent about John sending his emissaries

⁵ Cf. *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.9.1 §200; as quoted in Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian*, 111.

⁶ It is true that some prominent Lucan scholars such as H. Conzelmann says that because of Luke's insistence on John the Baptist being part of the OT testament, he does not assign the role of "precursor" of the Messiah to John. But other scholars such as J.A. Fitzmyer convincingly refutes Conzelmann's contention and establishes that, although in Luke we do not find an explicit statement of John being Jesus' forerunner as for instance in Mt 17:13, we can find implicit affirmation of this fact also in Luke (cf. 7:27). Fitzmyer argues that the different impression about Luke's assessment of John's role is due to the omission in the Third Gospel of Jesus' post-transfiguration conversation with his disciples on the identification of Elijah and the Baptist, during the course of which both in Mark vaguely (cf. Mk 9:11-13) and Matthew explicitly (cf. Mt 17:10-13) such identification is made; cf. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian*, 105-110.

⁷ Cf. Mk 1:2-11; 6:17-29; Mt 3:7-10; 3:11-12; 11:7-13; Lk 3:1-20; 3:16-17; 7:24-28; 16:16.

to Jesus seeking proof of his Messianic identity, both Matthew and Luke seem to highlight that episode (cf. Mt 11:2-6; Lk 7:18-23).

However, what is quite striking in this context is that only Luke devotes considerable space to describe John's ministry and the contents of his preaching (cf. Lk 3:1-20). The special emphasis the third evangelist seems to attach to the presentation of the Baptist's preaching is precisely what the present discussion trains its focus on.

2.2.1. *The Narrative Sequence in Its Literary Context*

With this passage, we might say, Luke's narration of the Gospel proper begins⁸. It starts off with what may be described as a "historical prologue" very much similar to the initial prologue of the whole Gospel found in 1:1-4. The historical prologue is constructed as one long periodic sentence, perhaps not as elegant as the initial prologue, but resembling it considerably. As backdrop of Jesus' ministry, a picture of the contemporary religious-political landscape is presented. What we have here is a list of the different territories which would eventually become the arena of Jesus' ministry, together with their respective rulers. Then follow the names of the Jewish religious functionaries of the time. Such beginning was part of the style followed by contemporary Hellenistic literature. Furthermore, it reminds us of the beginnings of some of the prophetic books (cf. Isa 1:1; Jer 1:1-3; Ez 1:1-3). The effort of the evangelist in this context seems to proceed from his desire to link the events in the life of Jesus to some of the known events of the general world history⁹. An effort, we might say, to link the facts of religious history to the more widely attested events of secular history.

⁸ Many scholars believe that the Infancy Narrative is to be taken as a kind of overture to the Gospel as a whole to which it is prefixed. The real Gospel narrative, thus, begins with the description of the ministry of John the Baptist. As Fitzmyer points out: "Luke 3:1-2 stands today as part of the larger unit 3:1-6, which introduces the ministry of John the Baptist as the introduction to the ministry narrative of the Third Gospel... Indeed, 3:1-2 may have been the opening sentence of the original composition of Luke, to which he subsequently prefixed the prologue and the infancy narrative..."; Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian*, 29.

⁹The historical information which Luke provides here is not fully indisputable. In fact, it is against the background of the perceived inaccuracy of the historical

In the immediately following verses the author makes an attempt to introduce the person of John the Baptist to the reader with the use of an OT citation. His intention is to introduce John in the manner of the OT prophets. "The word of God came to ..." is clearly in imitation of the phraseology found in Jer 1:1; Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1, etc. Particularly notable is Luke's use of the citation from Isa 40:3-5. These words of Prophet Isaiah are used by all four evangelists in order to link the ministry of John the Baptist with that of Jesus (Mk 1:2-3; Mt 3:3; Lk 3:4-6; Jn 1:23). What is remarkable is that it is only Luke who reproduces the fuller Isaian quotation in the context. Of special mention is his inclusion of the phrase "and all flesh shall see the salvation of God". This addition is another proof testifying to Luke's well attested predilection for the theme of "universality of salvation".

In the subsequent verses (7-17) the evangelist offers a summary of the preaching of John the Baptist. José Antonio Pagola paraphrases that summary as follows: "This man was putting God at the center and on the horizon of any search for salvation. The temple, sacrifices, interpretations of the law, even belonging to the chosen people; all that is relative. Only one thing was decisive and urgent; to be converted to God and embrace God's forgiveness"¹⁰. John's emphasis is clearly on an honest introspection, through which one perceives clearly where one stands in one's relationship to God and one's neighbour. The awareness thus gained, he maintained, should impel one to modify one's actions and revitalize one's relationships.

The narrative unit closes with a reference to John's arrest and detention by the tetrarch Herod. Unlike the other two Synoptists, Luke does not elaborate the intrigue and drama that accompanied John's conflict with Herod leading to his arrest. In fact, what this means is that the Baptist

facts that the evangelist makes part of his narrative that his credibility as a reliable historian is often called into question. This is a topic of animated discussion among scholars who focus their attention on the historicity of the events portrayed in Luke-Acts. The defenders of Luke would say that it not fair to judge what he wrote 2000 years ago by using the criteria of history-writing prevalent today.

¹⁰*Jesus an Historical Approximation*, 79.

is already put away from the public sphere even before Jesus would initiate his ministry¹¹. Luke does not even explicitly mention that Jesus' baptism took place in the hands of John, although that could be the right inference from the description of the surroundings (cf. 3:21).

2.3. The Message of the Baptist in Its Essence

2.3.1. John's Personal Integrity

It is true that Luke does not refer to John's clothing or food habits in his description of him which we find prominently portrayed in both Matthew and Mark (cf. Mt 3:4; Mk 1:6). The first two evangelists highlight the fact of John's distancing from "artificially made" clothing and sticking to food items directly derived from nature in view of focusing on his ascetic life style. The Third Evangelist dispenses with those details in his narrative. However, the itinerant preacher's personal transparency comes through remarkably sharpened in the Third Evangelist's references to him in the present context and elsewhere. John could get away with the stinging criticism that he raised against the attitude of the people on their face (cf. Lk 3:7-9) precisely because he enjoyed a high degree of moral authority with them. Their willingness to seek his advice and do his bidding to put themselves back on track and their meek submission to his suggestions was because they recognized him as operating without any personal agenda (cf. vv. 10-14).

The desert was the locus of John's ministry. This has most likely a symbolic significance. In the Bible, for the Israelites wandering in the "desert" was the stage that followed the liberation from the Egyptian bondage. Prominent biblical characters such as Moses (Ex 3), Elijah (1 Kgs 19) and Paul (Gal 1:7) had their period of maturation in the wilderness.

¹¹ Different authors see this separation between the careers of John and Jesus as motivated by different reasons. Conzelmann's famous thesis was that the separation was based on Luke's division of salvation history into three stages and the evangelist's desire to portray John as belonging to the Period of Israel. Others like Green (*Gospel of Luke*, 162) sees no such plan in Luke to separate the periods of John and Jesus. The Lucan effort in the context is to be seen more as part of his dramatic plan, allowing Jesus alone to occupy the centre of our attention from his baptism onward.

The solitary, uninhabited terrain is the ideal place for an encounter with God. Choosing the desert for the launching of his mission was another symbolic gesture. John wanted to keep a distance from the city, the seat of the rulers and the natural habitat of the rich, keep himself away from limelight and identify himself with those who lived in the edges of society. He chose the way of an itinerant prophet. "He went into all the region about the Jordan" means that he had no fixed residence. He was willing to face the evident uncertainties that would be part of the life of a perennially wandering seeker.

In the cryptic description of the circumstances leading to the Baptist's arrest and imprisonment (vv. 19-20), the Evangelist has left an evident clue to his uncompromising stand against moral depravity and evil ways. He was not one who would conveniently close his eyes to misdemeanors in high places to be "politically correct" and thus save his skin. He showed himself prepared to go to the farthest limit to defend his convictions. It is precisely this quality of his person that adds a redoubtable incisiveness to his teaching.

2.3.2. *The Basic Components of John's Teaching*

In 3:7-10 the evangelist tries to present the quintessential summary of John's preaching. These verses, being drawn from the Q source, he shares with Matthew (cf. Mt 3:7-10)¹². One notable difference is that whereas in Matthew the strongly-worded admonition¹³ is addressed to

¹² In the presentation of the teachings of John the Baptist Luke freely omits and adds material, although his dependence on his two basic sources of Mark and Q leave clear evidence even in the modified text. The effect of these compositional modifications is in view of highlighting John's ministry and to give it a distinctive character and to situate it in a proper context; cf. Luke T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina Series, Daniel J. Harrington (ed.), (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991) 66-67.

¹³ "John's words to the crowds are remarkably harsh in light of the fact they have come to be baptized. John does not greet them in friendly fashion but warns them that only complete repentance is adequate"; Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation, Volume One, The Gospel according to Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1991) 50.

the Pharisees and Sadducees, Luke addresses those words to the "multitude that came out to be baptized" by John.

The content of his proclamation summarizes the essential Christian kerygma: the coming of the Messiah, call for conversion, remission of sins and baptism (cf. Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2:14-40). What is elaborated in this cluster of verses and in the cluster immediately following it (vv. 10-14) is actually the outline of John's ministry proposed in 3:3. The focus is on a radical attitudinal change by which one turns to God and embraces God's purpose, a change which finds expression in the act of undergoing the repentance-baptism and living a transformed life¹⁴

Conversion (*metanoia*) is a key biblical idea and a fundamental theme in the prophetic preaching (cf. Am 4:6-11; Hos 5:4; 7:10; 11:5; Isa 9:12; Jer 3:10, etc.). The Hebrew root that lies behind the concept is *shub*, meaning "to turn away", "return", etc. The Septuagint translated this Hebrew verb as *epistrephein*, which however, gets modified in the NT. The preferred word for the NT is *metanoia* which expressed more clearly the sense of "change of mind" or "change of attitude". By taking a closer look at John's preaching we realize that what he means by conversion is a changed attitude to life which invariably gets translated into an active concern for one's neighbour. The authenticity of *metanoia*, thus, is made visible through concrete actions of concern for one's neighbour.

The crucial assertion in John's preaching, therefore, is this: "Bear fruits worthy of repentance". Do not be carried away by the presumed efficacy of ritual observances; be more resolute and express your commitment to conversion through actual, down-to-earth deeds of concern for others. Rituals can and do induce a sense of false security; a kind of self-assuredness that is deceptive and unrealistic. The claims proceeding from a "chosen-people syndrome" can be of such provenance. "This conversion had to occur at the deepest personal level," argues Pagola, "but it must also be translated into behavior worthy

¹⁴ Cf. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI, Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans, 1989) 171.

of a people faithful to God... This 'conversion' was absolutely necessary and could not be replaced by any religious rite, not even by baptism"¹⁵

Then there is an attempt to provide a set of concrete examples of "bearing fruits worthy of repentance" in vv. 10-14. Three groups, representing three specific situations of life - crowds, toll-collectors and soldiers - are perhaps meant as a random sampling standing for a cross-section of society. These verses, found only in the Lucan version of John's preaching, are holding the key for the right interpretation of the whole of the Baptist's message as presented by the Third Evangelist. As Green brilliantly highlights:

John's ethical message contains within it a social critique the profundity of which is appreciated only when it is recognized that it not only points the finger of judgment at large-scale injustice but in fact reaches into the relationship of day-to-day existence. Life at the local level and one's own normal network of relationships are touched by this ethical vision, with the result that "repentance" must be understood within and related to even the most mundane¹⁶.

Determined by the context in which vv. 10-14 are placed, the meaning that emerges is that it is by translating into concrete actions one's God-orientation or the repentance-baptism within the framework of the human community that one proves one's identity as part of the covenant-people. Furthermore, anyone who follows this line of action can find a place within the covenanted community irrespective of one's ethnic provenance ("God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham"). Indeed, the Baptist insists that the reckoning as children of Abraham does not happen by birth into the covenant community but through the right response to God's gracious initiative. Human decision with responsibility is a critical fact in the whole development¹⁷. Taking a cue from Prophet Isaiah who had voiced scathing criticism against God's people for their meaningless participation in cultic sacrifices and religious

¹⁵ *Jesus an Historical Approximation*, 83.

¹⁶ Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 174.

¹⁷ Cf. François Bovon, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (Lk1,1-9,50) (Zürich: Benziger Verlag, 1989) 172.

assembly (cf. Isa 1:10-17), John bluntly censures the people for the misuse of such meaningful rituals, pointing out that mere observance of the rubrics offered no protection against divine judgment. He maintains that the ritual act of baptism should mean a resounding rejection of old ways of living and a ready acceptance of God's will, both these dimensions assimilated with sufficient seriousness so that the resulting conviction produces behaviour sanctioned by God¹⁸.

The demands of genuine conversion or attitudinal change assume concrete form in the question-answer sequence that we find in vv. 10-14. Just as the crowds, tax collectors and soldiers, similar categories of people could raise the question "what shall we do?" and elicit an answer appropriate to their specific context. Although articulated in different words all such responses would invariably highlight the need for translating on a day-to-day basis the genuinely-felt "God-orientation" into recognizable acts expressive of an active concern for one's needy neighbour. It is this same insight we find embodied in Jesus' love commandment which surely constitutes the sublime essence of his moral vision (cf. Mk 12:28-34; Mt 22:34-40; Lk 10:25-28). If the words of John the Baptist as obtaining in Lk 3:7-17 are borrowed from the early Church's catechetical instruction addressed to the catechumens, we can say that the preparation for baptism in those early days placed a premium on the aspect of social responsibility among believers¹⁹. In other words, the need for adopting a simple life style that is built on a deeply-felt sensitivity to the needs of others, which therefore deliberately eschews all expressions of wanton luxury, is part of the fundamental convictions linked to the living of the Christian vocation. This realization is what provides the ideological underpinning to the effort to reinvent the Christian community as a Church of the poor that exists for the poor.

3. Towards Restoring the Pristine Image

The discussions carried out in the preceding pages around the presentation of the ministry of John the Baptist in the Gospel of Luke have placed in relief certain fundamental facts about the values that the

¹⁸ Cf. Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 174-175.

¹⁹ Cf., 168-169.

great forerunner of Jesus projected through his life and work. The starting point of any consideration on John should be the exceptional brilliance of the example of his life as a person. He lived a life of patent simplicity and impeccable integrity. It was on account of it that he could make such a forceful appeal to his contemporaries to reform their lives by making a conscious option for a personal conversion and to ensure that such conversion led to modes of behaviour befitting a people of "God-orientation". While spelling out the details of such behaviour he highlighted values such as sharing, honesty, fairness and equity. Side by side with the effort to emphasize positive values, John also drew attention to certain destructive traits such as greed, dishonesty, indifference to the plight of others and extortion. We find this expressed with particular clarity in 3:10-14²⁰.

The Baptist's teaching mediates the call for a consummate change in social relations, something we could call a revolution. But it was not a bloody revolution that he advocated. History enjoins a reminder to us that changes brought about by violent revolutions are perfunctory in nature and their effects short-lived. The revolution envisioned by the Baptist would be proceeding from a complete attitudinal make-over and the changes ushered in by it are sure to have a lasting effect.

If we take a close look at the contemporary socio-political and religious scenario we cannot fail to detect a world on a collision course with all sorts of positive values, one that is in the smothering grip of destructive traits such as unbridled corruption, mindless greed and callous indifference to the plight of the poor. Practically all processes in the socio-political arena are at the mercy of the free market economy. Transnational capitalism has become a law unto itself, triggering the triumphant march of neocolonialism, fostered by multinational behemoths and conglomerates leading ultimately to the concentration of wealth in a few hands. Maximization of profit is accepted as the unchallengeable major premise of all economic activity and many believe that no norms of ethics apply to it. For every billion that flows into the combined kitty of these subtle

²⁰ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, 1997) 235, observes that Lk 3:10-14 especially emphasizes such values as sharing goods, justice for the poor, and kind sensitivity.

extortionists, countless multitudes are driven to the wall. The Church has been for most part watching the drama from the sidelines, at times even indirectly contributing to it by its silent inaction. It is this which has contributed to the widespread perception that the Church is stuck to the apron strings of the high and mighty. And again it is this which has sullied the Church's pristine image as an institution always and everywhere committed to the service of the poor.

The refurbishing of this smudged image has to begin with a firm taking of stand against the present world order built on the ideology of free market economy which has established the pursuit of profit as the sole end of all business. That would in essence mean a deliberate option to take the side of the world's ever-swelling ranks of the poor. The demands of the Baptist speak to a world where people live on the frontiers of existence, people whose stifling preoccupations have to do with fundamental needs such as food and clothing. As long as these and other such basic needs remain unmet for large sections of people, all claims of fashioning a welfare state economy would be comprehensively challenged. Built into the demands of the Baptist is an imperative for a radical decision-making addressed to all believers to limit their choices to what is required for meeting the basic needs of life, so that they are willing to share the second cloak with the ill-clad and the food that is beyond the limit of staying the present hunger with the starving. Within the framework of the Christian precept of love even the search for what is sufficient for preserving life acquires a special significance²¹.

. But an ideological shift alone would not suffice. Concrete actions should follow; the equivalent of "the fruits in keeping with repentance" in the language of the Baptist. Some of the impulses originating from the words and deeds of Pope Francis impact us powerfully in this connection. In November 2013 a large section of the print media and several Television channels carried an image of the Pope enfolding in a warm embrace a man with a grotesquely disfigured face. Respecting the privacy of that man, the media did not reveal any personal details about him except to say that he had come to the Vatican unannounced to take part in the weekly audience of the Pope. The Pope while making

²¹ Cf. Heinz Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium, Erster Teil: Kommentar zu Kap. 1,1 – 9,50* (Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 1984) 169.

his way to the podium from where he would greet and address the gathered crowd, took notice of the man and immediately alighting from the “*Papamobile*” went straight to greet him. The body language of the Pontiff clearly showed that he was not propelled by the desire to use the occasion as a photo-op for enhancing his pro-poor image, but was genuinely moved by the appalling state of the unfortunate man. This has been frequently referred to as an icon of his much-lauded commitment to the poor and suffering. Through this he gave a concrete example of what he means when he says that our commitment to the poor must be “person to person, in the flesh.” In a book entitled *On Heaven and Earth*, written three years before he became the Pontiff, Pope Francis said: “It is not enough to mediate this commitment through institutions, which obviously help because they have a multiplying effect, but that is not enough. They do not excuse us from our establishing personal contact with the needy. The sick must be cared for, even when we find them repulsive and repugnant.”²²

Against the insensitive practice of throwing away food, the Pope had this to say: “Once our grandparents were very careful not to throw away any leftover food. Consumerism has led us to become used to an excess and daily waste of food, to which, at times we are no longer able to give a just value... We should remember, however, that throwing food away is like stealing from the table of the poor, the hungry”. He made these comments at the General Audience on June 5, 2013, which coincided with the World Environment Day²³. These words assume great significance when we remember that according to the latest data of the Rome-based Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), nearly 870 million people around the world suffer from chronic malnutrition. It is estimated that every year some 1.3 billion tons of food ends up as waste!

In the face of widening income gaps in the world’s leading economies, especially after the global economic crisis, the Pope, in his first World Day of Peace message of January 1, 2014, challenged

²² Cf. #ReliefPH:Pope Francis on disaster, charity (accessed on March 3, 2014).

²³ Cf. www.vatican.va (accessed on March 3, 2014).

the rich to choose a “sober” lifestyle and to share their wealth with those who make do with the “crumbs”. According to Pope Francis, the widening gap between the poor and the rich hinders fraternity. The practice of avoiding luxuries and sharing wealth, insists the Pope, is fundamental to following Christ. It cannot be limited to only those who have taken a vow of poverty, but all have to pay heed to it as it is part of the essence of being a Christian.

Against the background of the growing pull of the “acquisitive culture”, the Pope urges a deliberate option to live with fewer possessions. Addressing a group of seminarians and novices at a Vatican function on July 6, 2013, the Pontiff warned them against luxurious lives that seek “the joy of the world in the latest smart phone, the fastest car”. “Certainly, possessions, money and power can give a momentary thrill, the illusion of being happy,” concedes the Pope, “but they end up possessing us and making us always to want to have more, never satisfied.”

Thus in the words and actions of the present Roman Pontiff there is unmistakable indication that he has opted for a more humble Church focused on the needs of the poor. This in fact amounts to saying that the head of the Church is leading from the front in aligning with the “little ones” whom the prevailing culture seems to consistently push to the periphery. If the Church as one body takes a cue from the Pope and its members individually and corporately accept the Gospel call of “producing fruits in keeping with repentance” - so clearly echoed in the words and gestures of the great prophet John the Baptist - through that effort we shall be seen as setting out resolutely towards the goal of transforming ourselves into a poor Church that exists for the poor.

The Poor in the Old Testament

James B. Dabhi

Introit

With the help of the Concordances¹ of the Hebrew Bible, I ascertained the verses, where the word “poor” is employed in the texts of the Hebrew Bible. At some locations, the Concordances offered me the variants of the term “poor,” viz., “needy,” “widow,” “orphan,” “alien,” “strange.” All these variants denote social groups that form the marginalized section of the Israelite society. Since the Book of Sirach does not belong to the Canon of the Hebrew Bible, I did cursory reading of the same to glean those texts that use one of the above-mentioned locutions. All these texts, having the word “poor” or its cognates, provide the understanding of the Old Testament authors with regard to the poor. The biblical authors, in general, express the sentiments and comprehension of their own society. To paraphrase, the biblical authors, in most cases, mirror their milieu’s reflections. So, one could allege that these texts unfold the Israelite society’s attitude and approach toward the poor. The attitude and approach may not always be healthy and holistic. Hence, the biblical authors become the revelators of God’s mind and heart vis-à-vis the poor. I peruse these authors’ texts on the poor as a seeker. Subsequently, without preposterous claim of completeness, I formulate the understanding of the poor, emerging out of these texts of the Old Testament.

Formulation of the Understanding of the Poor

The Lord is the source of poverty and richness. Therefore, the poor and rich are equal in the sight of the Lord. However, the Lord opts to

¹ C. H. Wright, *The Bible Reader's Encyclopaedia and Concordance* (London: Collins' Clear-Tyre Press), 290. James String, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1974), 799.

identify the Self of the Lord with the poor. The equality between the poor and rich demands that they are judged impartially in legal matters. Though equal in the eyes of the divine, the rich and poor are unequal in eyes of the human. There are concrete factors that cause economic poverty. The economic poverty generates pathetic plight of the poor, educating human response as well as divine response. The human response involves to be generous to the poor, to do justice to them, to shun oppressing them, to be concerned for them, to grant concession to them, to have consideration of them, and to pray for them. The divine response includes to defend the poor, to promise to them, and to reward those who bless the poor and to punish those who curse the poor.

Elaboration of the Understanding of the Poor

The Lord is the source of both poverty and richness

The narrative in 1 Sam 1:1-18 presents the barren² Hannah, the wife of Elkanah. Hannah suffers continually at the hands of her rival Peninnah

² Encyclopaedia Judaica describes Barrenness. The barrenness signifies the inability of man and woman to procreate. Procreation is considered a blessing in the Hebrew Bible and it is a commandment (Gen 1:28; 9:7). God's blessings bestowed on Israel always included fecundity (Lev 26:9; Deut 28:11) and the absence of barrenness (Exod 23:26; Deut 7:14). Children are seen as the greatest blessing (Ps 127:3-5); "Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord" (Ps 128:3-4). The prodigious fertility of the Israelites in Egypt antagonized the Egyptians (Exod 1:7, 12). Procreation is one of the main purposes of marriage, and in later times a male offspring was also prized. Barrenness was a curse and a punishment (Lev 20:20-21; Jer 22:30). Abimelech and his wives were punished, though only temporarily, with barrenness (Gen 20:17-18), and so was Michal, Saul's daughter and David's wife (2 Sam 6:23). Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Samson's mother, Hannah, and the Shunamite woman were all barren at first, but God, who holds the key to fecundity, granted their and their husbands' prayers. Rachel preferred death to childlessness (Gen 30:1). A childless scholar is not eligible to sit on the Sanhedrin. Isaiah called Zion in her distress "Sing, O barren one who did not bear" (Isa 54:1a). However, for the eunuch who exclaimed "I am a dry tree," Isaiah has a word of comfort, saying, "I will give, in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; . . ." (Isa 56:5). The Book of Sirach said that it was

on account of her inability to give birth to a child. Factually, the real source of Hannah's agony is the Lord, "because the Lord had closed her womb" (1 Sam 1:6b).³ The Israelite society pushed a barren woman into the margin as she was considered accursed by God. Therefore, the consoling utterance of her husband fails to make any impression upon Hannah. To the only remedy that Hannah could have recourse in order to restore the peace of her troubled heart is to present herself before the Lord and implore. The Lord constitutes the source of her distress. Her poverty is engendered by the Lord, because the Lord has closed her womb. Therefore, only the Lord can alleviate her poverty. Hannah explicates to Eli, the priest at the temple of Shiloh who misunderstands and rebukes her, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time" (1 Sam 1:15-16). In response, Eli blesses Hannah that the God of Israel may grant her the petition she is making. Eli does not know what Hannah was beseeching, but the reader knows that she is begging for a male child. 1 Samuel 1:1-18 forms a routine story of any family, where the perpetrator inflicts insults and humiliation on the victim. Here, the victim Hannah verbalizes the understanding of the Israelite society, namely, that the Lord is responsible for the pathos of a person and, therefore, only the Lord is able to transmute the scenario.

better to die childless than to have children who were without the fear of the Lord (Sir 16:1-4). The cause of sterility may lie as much with the husband as with the wife, which is suggested by Abraham in Gen 15:2. A husband should divorce his wife after ten years of childless marriage; though she may marry again. Distinction ought to be made between accidental sterility and congenital or self-inflicted impotence or barrenness. Deuteronomy 23:2 prohibits an impotent man to marry a free-born Israelite, when the impotence is self-inflicted. A priest who has his testicles crushed is unfit for Temple service (Lev 21:20). See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Volume 4 (Jerusalem: Keterpress Enterprises, 1978), 256-258

³ Here and throughout the project, I quote *The Holy Bible: The New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2003).

Eventually, Hannah conceives and gives birth to a son, whom she names Samuel. After weaning him, maybe at the age of three years according to 2 Macc 7:27, Hannah presents him to the Lord for the rest of his life as she had vowed to the Lord. After relinquishing her son for the service of the Lord, Hannah recites a prayer, wherein she expresses her personal experience of the Lord. Her experiential knowledge of the Lord obliges her to confess that “The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts” (1 Sam 2:7). Poverty and richness are designed by the Lord. No musings are furnished as to why one is made poor and the other rich. Poverty is understood as the enigmatic design of the Lord, which is inscrutable to human mind. However, poverty does not constitute the last stroke of the Lord’s design as Hannah’s prayer unfolds, “He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor” (1 Sam 2:8a). Hannah voices how the Lord comes across to her, apropos of her misery and glory, as the originator of both poverty and richness of human beings. The Book of 1 Samuel belongs to the category of the Deuteronomistic history, which was written during the exilic period from 586 B.C. to 538 B.C. Thus, from sixth century B.C. onward, Israel holds the Lord, paradoxically, responsible for both poverty and richness.

The Book of Proverbs, which is compiled in 4th century B.C., has in 30:8-9 a prayer to God. Certain Agur in his prayer reveals that God bestows poverty or richness. Hannah prayed to the Lord to supplant her poverty with richness; Agur pleads God to supply him just what he requires, “. . . give me neither poverty nor riches, feed me with the food that I need” (Prov 30:8). Agur demonstrates an imitable indifference toward poverty and richness, because he knows the innate danger of being either rich or poor. In supplicating God not to make him deny God because of his richness or defile God because of his poverty, Agur longs for equidistance from both poverty and richness. Only God can fulfill Agur’s desire as both poverty and richness flow from one and the same source, i.e., God. Another book from the Wisdom Literature section by name the Book of Sirach has this one liner, “Good things and bad, life and death, poverty and wealth, come from the Lord” (Sir 11:14). The Book of Sirach was written in Jerusalem (Sir 50:27), when Simon son of

Onias was the high priest, the time could probably be around 180 B.C. Thus, the Book of Sirach after the Book of Proverbs, about two centuries later, still holds the same understanding that the source of poverty and richness is one and the same God of Israel. This survey of the History section and Wisdom Literature section aids me to propound that the Lord constitutes that inscrutable source that makes one poor and the other rich.

The poor and rich share equal status

On account of the same Lord, who is the source of both poverty and richness, equality is proposed between the poor and rich. Economic disparity has discriminated human beings in the present time, which is challenged by the understanding of the poor in the Old Testament. Moses is instructed by the Lord to conduct a census of the Israelites to register them. Each Israelite is compelled to pay a fixed registration fee. The Lord dictates, "Each one who is registered, from twenty years old and upward, shall give the Lord's offering. The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less, than the half shekel . . ." (Exod 30:14-15a). By paying more the rich might feel superior or by paying less the poor might feel inferior; so, the Lord deletes the complexes on either side. Richness or poverty must not engender inequality. Jeremiah equates the poor and rich on another count. According to Jer 5:4-5, both poor and rich do not know the law of their God. To paraphrase, both poor and rich are lawless people. Economic condition of the Israelites has not influenced their law-abiding nature either positively or negatively. The Lord does not discriminate between the poor and the rich, but the Lord discriminates between the loyal and the disloyal. The Book of Proverbs enhances the concept of the poor being on a par with the rich by stating, "The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all" (Prov 22:2). Further, "The poor and the oppressor have this in common: the Lord gives light to the eyes of both" (Prov 29:13). The fourth friend of Job called Elihu in Job 34:19, too, through a rhetorical question supports the equality between the rich and poor in the eyes of God, "who shows no partiality to nobles nor regards the rich more than the poor, for they are all the work of his hands?" The Teacher in the Book of Ecclesiastes offers his reflection, wherein a real possibility of a

poor becoming the king of a nation is highlighted, "One can indeed come out of prison to reign, even though born poor in the kingdom" (Eccl 4:14). Such a possibility exists because of the wisdom that the poor might be possessing. The Teacher implies that poor or rich both stand equal chance as they are equal in the eyes of God. In other words, the poor does not forfeit any opportunity that the rich may have, provided the poor is wise. Thus, what holds worth is the wisdom not the wealth. The Book of Ecclesiastes is dated about 300 B.C., connoting that the poor and rich equality diffused right up to the time of the New Testament.

However, the Lord identifies the Self of the Lord with the poor

The poor and rich are equal in the sight of the Lord; yet, the Lord opts to identify the Self of the Lord with the poor. Jeremiah in his oracle addressed to King Shallum of Jerusalem mentions about the king's father Josiah, "He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? Says the Lord" (Jer 22:16). Jeremiah exhorts King Shallum to recognize the invisible God in the visible poor of his kingdom. The Lord prefers to reveal the Self of the Lord in the surest way in the poor. In the Book of Proverbs, the reader comes across an apothegm, which sounds almost emanating from the New Testament,⁴

⁴ Evangelist Matthew, in his eschatological discourse of chapters 23-25 dramatizes the scene of the separation of sheep and goats with the words of Jesus, "... 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me'" (Matt 25:40).

Norbert F. Lohfink explains Matthew 25 in an appealing way. The background of Jesus' depiction of the judgment of the world in Matt 25 is the question asked by Jesus' followers: How can those, who have not followed the Messiah, be saved? This question is not a matter of the salvation of Christians. The Christians are saved by following Jesus. This question is a matter of the rest of human society. God's attitude to them is determined by their attitude to the poor. The poor are the hungry, the thirsty, strangers, the naked, the sick, the prisoners. These are those poor in whom the son of Man is present. These are the least sisters and brothers. These are the poor, who have come to Jesus and have entered with Him into the reign of God. The nations spontaneously

“Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him” (Prov 14:31). Further, Prov 17:5a equates the mockery of the poor with that of their maker, “Those who mock the poor insult their Maker.” In this way, God identifies the Self of God with the poor in the negative treatment meted out to the poor. In the positive facet, too, Prov 19:17 identifies God with the poor, “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and will be repaid in full.” Sirach 4:1-10 presents a guide map of how to become the child of the Most High. The footholds of that ladder to achieve the status of child of the Most High are constituted by the poor and needy, the oppressed and orphan. Serving these classes of humanity equals serving the transcendent God. In this manner, though the God of Israel is the maker of both poor and rich and though both poor and rich are equal in dignity as God’s creatures, when the God of Israel discerns to identify the Self of God with either the poor or rich, God uncompromisingly identifies the Self of God with the poor. The poor have the privilege to reveal the unseen God.

In legal matters, the poor and rich are to be judged impartially

Maybe on account of the equality that exists between the poor and rich, partiality for the poor is prohibited in the Covenant Code,⁵ mentioned

determine to persecute these poor, because they are different. If the nations do not persecute these poor out of sympathy for them, then the nations have already entered into the reign of God. The principle seems to be: The Israelites themselves will be judged by whether or not they have eliminated poverty in Israel by following Jesus. The nations will be judged by their conduct toward the poor of the Lord. See Norbert F. Lohfink, *Option for the Poor: The Basic Principle of Liberation Theology in the Light of the Bible*, translated by Linda M. Maloney, edited by Duane L. Christensen (Berkeley, CA: Bibal Press, 1987), 75-76.

⁵ Michael D. Coogan explains that the final editors of the Pentateuch inserted into an older narrative legal and ritual traditions of different origins and dates in part to provide them with a normative authority by associating them with Moses and the revelations at Sinai. These collections of laws are known as the Covenant Code, the Ritual Decalogue, and the Holiness Code. Then, Coogan elaborates the Covenant Code (Exod 20:22-23:33). See Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 120, 122-125.

in Exod 20:22-23:33. The Covenant Code employs the genre called apodictic law in Exod 23:2-3, "... when you bear witness in a lawsuit, you shall not side with the majority so as to pervert justice; nor shall you be partial to the poor in a lawsuit." Apodictic laws are categorical and unconditional in their formulation, making absolute demand. The Holiness Code,⁶ depicted in Leviticus 17-26, contains another apodictic law in Lev 19:15, "You shall not render an unjust judgment, you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor." Deuteronomy 1:16-17; 16:19 stress on impartial judgment. Thus, the legal texts discourage any consideration either to the poor or to the rich. In front of the judge, economic disparity should not be an influencing criterion.

The Book of Proverbs endorses the impartiality in judgment, pronouncing, "Partiality in judging is not good" (Prov 24:23b). However, the same book has an intriguing clause, "To show partiality is not good—yet for a piece of bread a person may do wrong" (Prov 28:21). In tune with Exod 23:2-3 and Lev 19:15, the Wisdom Literature issues the same prohibition, but true to its characteristic of being pragmatic the Wisdom literature adjoins a humanitarian nuance, i.e., a poor may steal bread, which is excusable. I hold that such a humanitarian concern must supersede the legal concern. I approve the balanced outlook toward the rich and poor; yet, I opine that the poor deserve more consideration and sympathy for the reason of their predicament. The Book of Sirach advises not to be partial against the poor and, thus, consolidates the equality between the poor and the rich, "It is not right to despise one who is intelligent but poor, and it is not proper to honor one who is sinful" (Sir 10:23). In the world of today, the poor cannot afford to bribe the judge. It behoves the judge to remain neutral to the allurements of the rich against the poor. With the legal texts of the Old Testament, Sirach 35:16-22 resonates that the Lord will not demonstrate partiality to the poor, but in the same breath affixes that the Lord will listen to the prayer of the poor. The wisdom texts acquiesce in the equality of the poor and rich in legal matters advocated by the laws, but append that the Lord empathizes with the poor more than with the rich. Wisdom Literature came into being out of daily experiences of human lives and, therefore,

⁶ See Coogan, *The Old Testament*, 145-149.

its teaching reflects more the heart of the divine than the mind of the human.

Though equal in status, the rich and poor are unequal in facts

The Hebrew title of the Book of Proverbs contains the plural genitive form of the Hebrew word *mashal*. The Hebrew word *mashal* designates a saying, which involves comparison. Contrast is another form of comparison, where, instead of parity, disparity is highlighted. The Book of Proverbs communicates ethical teachings with regard to the rich and poor, based on experience or observation, communal or personal, creating contrasts. According to Prov 10:15, the wealth serves as a fortress for the rich; whereas the lack of it causes ruin of the poor. Therefore, the rich can withstand calamity, but the poor cannot. Proverbs 13:8 introduces wealth as the origin of crisis, "Wealth is a ransom for a person's life, but the poor get no threats." One regularly comes across a news piece in the social media of a person from the rich class kidnapped and a huge sum demanded in exchange. According to the biblical wisdom, the poor is more relaxed than the rich, as the former faces no such threat of being taken as hostage. The conduct of the poor and rich is contrasted in Prov 18:23, "The poor use entreaties, but the rich answer roughly." The wealth generates arrogance and makes the rich haughty. Proverbs 19:1 continues in the same vein, contrasting the poor person of integrity with rich fool, "Better the poor walking in integrity than one perverse of speech who is a fool." Almost synonymous parallelism of Prov 19:1 is found in Prov 28:6, "Better to be poor and walk in integrity than to be crooked in one's ways even though rich." Stark contrast is presented by Prov 19:4, "Wealth brings many friends, but the poor are left friendless." For the weddings of the rich or at their burials thousands throng; the same may not be witnessed for the poor. Proverbs 28:8 ("One who augments wealth by exorbitant interest gathers it for another who is kind to the poor") contrasts the rich, who extorts exorbitant interest, with the other, who generously doles out to the poor. The future of both miser extortionist and generous donor reveals that it is the generous that benefits, not the extortionist. Proverb 28:11 demonstrates the contrast in the field of perception. The rich perceives the esteem of the self only; whereas the intelligent poor has insight of the reality.

In the Book of Job, Zophar, one of the three friends of Job, performs as the mouthpiece of the conventional wisdom. Zophar opines that a time will come in the life of the wicked, when "their children will seek the favor of the poor, and their hands will give back their wealth" (Job 20:10). According to the conventional wisdom, the future of the rich and poor will be reversed, i.e., the present rich will become the future poor and vice versa, but the contrast may persist. The Teacher in the Book of Ecclesiastes adduces an example in 9:13-16 of the contrast between the foolish rich and wise poor, wherein a great foreign king besieges a little city but a poor wise resident delivers it. Then, the Teacher infers that wisdom is better than might. However, the Teacher laments that the wisdom of the poor wise resident is despised. The Book of Sirach contrasts the poor and rich based on the criteria employed to honor them, "The poor are honored for their knowledge, while the rich are honored for their wealth (Sir 10:30). The Book of Sirach unfolds the poignant contrast that exists between the rich and poor in 13:3, "A rich person does wrong, and even adds insults; a poor person suffers wrong, and must add apologies." One could easily fantasize a scene in any metropolitan, wherein a rich car owner after hitting a poor rickshaw puller hurls at the poor the most abusive language; while the poor has to clasp the hands and beg the pardon. More penetrating contrast between the rich and poor is depicted in Sir 13:21-24, "The rich person speaks and all are silent, they extol to the clouds what he says. The poor person speaks and they say, "Who is this fellow?" And should he stumble, they even push him down" (verse 23). The Book of Sirach offers a utilitarian advice in 29:21-22 to inhabit under one's own roof, however poor it may be, because it is better to have frugal food at one's home than sumptuous banquet in the other's house. In any cosmopolitan, one finds food cheaply, not the residence. With regard to the work and rest, Sir 31:3-4 creates contrast between the rich and poor. The rich labors and earns a lot; the poor toils and gathers meager. The rich rests and feels refreshed; the poor rests and becomes needy.

Creating contrast between the rich and poor, Prov 16:8 condemns wealth generated through immoral means, "Better is a little with righteousness than large income with injustice." Counseling to become person of loyalty, Prov 19:22 states that it is better to be poor than a liar.

The Teacher in the Book of Ecclesiastes passes a verdict, contrasting the poor and rich based on the wisdom, "Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king, who will no longer take advice" (Eccl 4:13). Contrasting again the poor and rich based on physical health, Sir 30:14 provides the popular wisdom: better to be healthy poor than sickly rich. The Wisdom Literature section creates contrast so that the character formation is not compromised in a cutthroat competition to become rich.

Poverty is caused by six factors

Poverty from the monetary point of view is caused by six factors according to Wisdom Literature. Conventional wisdom, depicted in Prov 6:6-11, holds that poverty is caused by laziness. Laziness is the first cause of poverty. The wisdom author offers an illustration of an ant, which industriously gathers during harvest so that it does not starve. It is the work that constitutes the human dignity, not the laziness. Each creature in the universe works. The one who works eats; the one who does not work starves. The same cause of laziness is reiterated in Prov 10:4, "A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich." Again, laziness is presented as the factor producing poverty in Prov 13:4, "The appetite of the lazy craves, and gets nothing, while the appetite of the diligent is richly supplied." Mere words, but no works, engender poverty, "In all toil there is profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty" (Prov 14:23). Proverbs 19:15 outright blames laziness and idleness for poverty, "Laziness brings on deep sleep; an idle person will suffer hunger." Therefore, a counsel is offered not to be lazy in Prov 20:13, "Do not love sleep, or else you will come to poverty; open your eyes, and you will have plenty of bread." Laziness is intimated by employing a metaphorical phrase "love sleep" and diligence is hinted at by the phrase "open your eyes." This counsel obliquely lists laziness as the prime cause of poverty. Second cause of poverty is to ignore the instruction that is imparted, "Poverty and disgrace are for the one who ignores instruction" (Prov 13:18a). Injustice constitutes the third cause of poverty, "The field of the poor may yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice" (Prov 13:23). Loving to have disproportionate parties is recorded as the fourth cause of poverty, "Whoever loves pleasure will suffer want; whoever loves wine and oil will not be rich"

(Prov 21:17). Wisdom lies in feasting proportionate to one's income. Sirach 18:33 endorses such a thinking, "Do not become a beggar by feasting with borrowed money, when you have nothing in your purse." Alcoholism could be cited as the fifth cause of poverty as the advice in Prov 23:20-21 elucidates, "Do not be among winebibbers, or among gluttonous eaters of meat; for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and drowsiness will clothe them with rags." By creating a contrast between plenty of bread and plenty of poverty, the Book of Proverbs gives the sixth reason of poverty, namely, pursuit of worthlessness. "Anyone who tills the land will have plenty of bread, but one who follows worthless pursuits will have plenty of poverty" (Prov 28:19). An instance can be considered to comprehend this proverb; someone invests his money in gambling instead of in worthwhile business. He may gain at initial stages, but, then, loses every penny all of a sudden. Material poverty is created by human beings themselves according to the biblical wisdom.⁷ Therefore, appropriate measures are suggested to eradicate the material poverty. A person can become self sufficient, if she or he budgets her or his debit commensurate to her or his credit.

Plight of the poor is pathetic

The parable that Nathan relates to King David in 2 Sam 12:1-4, after the latter had committed the twin sins of adultery and murder, brings forth the plight of the poor, ". . . but he (the rich man) took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him" (2 Sam 12:4). The poor in this parable suffers at the hands of the rich. The rich man snatches the poor man's lamb; can the poor man do the same?

Isaiah describes in pathos-filled locutions the plight of the poor of the eighth-century Judah. The vineyard of the poor is appropriated by the elders and princes. The poor are looted by these leaders. Presenting an

⁷ Lohfink adds one more cause of poverty based on the Exodus-credo mentioned in Deut 26:5-10. The misery of the poor is explained in the Exodus-credo as resulting from economic exploitation and social degradation. In Exod 1, the king of Egypt decrees the oppression. Later, in Exod 5, when Moses and Aaron try to negotiate with the king, the king intensifies the oppression through a new, deliberate decision. Poverty is recognized here as the product of human action. See Lohfink, *Option for the Poor*, 39.

inanimate imagery of millstone for the elders and princes, Isaiah retorts a rhetorical question, "What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor? Says the Lord God of hosts" (Isa 3:15).

Proverbs 28:15 reverberates with Isaiah, but employs animate analogy for the ruler of the poor, "Like a roaring lion or a charging bear is a wicked ruler over a poor people." Such an aphorism signifies that the wicked ruler sucks the blood of the poor. To depict how the poor are eliminated from the populace, Prov 30:14 utilizes the imagery of swords and knives for the rulers, "There are those whose teeth are swords, whose teeth are knives, to devour the poor from off the earth, the needy from among mortals." Job 24:14 adds that "The murderer rises at dusk to kill the poor and needy and in the night is like a thief." Psalmist, too, observes the persecution of the poor by the wicked, "In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor" (Ps 10:2a).⁸ Psalm 10 is classified as Individual Lament. Like Prov 28:15, the psalmist uses the analogy of lion for the wicked to depict the helplessness and vulnerability of the poor in front of the wicked, "they (the wicked) lurk in secret like a lion in its covert; they lurk that they may seize the poor; they seize the poor and drag them off in their net" (Ps 10:9). Proverbs 14:20a states the fact, "The poor are disliked even by their neighbors." The poor live in total isolation. The isolation of the poor is aggravated by their own kin as verbalized by Prov 19:7, "If the poor are hated even by their kin, how much more are they shunned by their friends! When they call after them, they are not there." As the poor are compelled to borrow cash or kind to meet both ends, the poor are pushed into slavery as Prov 22:7 evinces, "The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender." Each day of the poor is inundated with toil and trouble, "All

⁸The Psalms exhibit the Faithful's praise and worship, joy and confidence, thanksgiving and trust. The Psalms manifest pain and suffering, distress and sorrow, disaster and abandonment. Such personal pain and national suffering, individual hope and collective aspiration have given birth to 150 Psalms. In the Pentateuch and Prophets, the speaker is the deity; in the Psalms, the speaker is the devotee. Analogous to five divisions of the Pentateuch, 150 Psalms are divided into five divisions, based on the closing doxology. The five divisions of the Psalms are Psalms 1-41, Psalms 42-72, Psalms 73-89, Psalms 90-106, and Psalms 107-150.

the days of the poor are hard" (Prov 15:15a). Job 24:3-12 presents a perfect picture of the plight of the poor. According to that picture, either the only means of livelihood of the poor or the dearest infant of the widow is taken away as pledge. The poor toil for the others and remain hungry, thirsty, naked, and roofless. The poor are thrust off the road. They groan and cry for help, but even God does not hearken to their plea. The Teacher in the Book of Ecclesiastes apprises that the poor know how to behave before the other human beings. Then, the Teacher poses a rhetorical question in Eccl 6:8 what do the poor have? This rhetorical question implies that the poor may have knowledge to comport themselves, but lack all the basic necessities of life.

One is recommended to be generous

The plight of the poor must elicit a response from any sensitive human being. The legal texts exhort to exercise generosity toward the poor. In the Covenant Code (Exod 20:22-23:33), another genre is also utilized, which is called casuistic law. The casuistic law deals with specific cases. Therefore, the casuistic law is conditional in nature. Exodus 22:25-26 prescribes such a casuistic law, wherein the one who lends money to the poor is commanded not to consider himself as the creditor, not to exact interest, and not to retain the cloak taken as a pledge from the poor after sunset. Deuteronomic Code⁹ (Deut 12-26) includes some casuistic laws with regard to returning the pledge of the poor before sunset (Deut 24:12-13). Deuteronomy 24:17b goes overboard to recommend not to take pledge at all on any kind of loan that is made. The Deuteronomic Code (Deut 12-26) contains casuistic laws apropos of lending to the needy, too, whatever the needy may require. Deuteronomy 15:7-11 instructs lending with total generosity of both mind and hand. For example, "You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, "The seventh year, the year of remission, is near," and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing" (Deut 15:8-9a). Sirach 29:1-2 reiterates what the legal texts of Deut 15:7-11 commands on the subject of lending to the neighbor. The Book of Sirach belongs to the Wisdom Literature section. The Wisdom Literature section does not enjoy the authority on a par with the Pentateuch; yet, being the maxim, Sir 29:2 may convince the lender:

⁹ See Coogan, *The Old Testament*, 175-180.

"Lend to your neighbor in his time of need; repay your neighbor when a loan falls due." Deuteronomy 15:12-18 prescribe the legislation to set free a Hebrew slave in the seventh year with liberal provision of flock, grain, and wine. While in slavery, the way a master must deal with his slave is stipulated in Sir 33:31, "If you have but one slave, treat him like yourself, because you have bought him with blood. If you have but one slave, treat him like a brother, for you will need him as you need your life." One Historical Book called the Book of Esther enjoins upon all the Jews the Feast of *Purim*. The Book of Esther recommends that on these two days of the feast, gifts of food should be sent to one another and presents be given to the poor (Esth 9:22). The Feast of *Purim* that commemorates the survival of the Jews from the evil plot of their enemies has to be celebrated by keeping the poor in focus.

Another mode of being generous is through almsgiving. The Book of Tobit propounds a lofty idea of almsgiving. Tobit mulls that since he has implored God to grant him death, he is on the verge of departing. So, he imparts his farewell instructions to his only heir Tobias in Tob 4:7-11, where almsgiving is stressed. Tobit claims, "Indeed, almsgiving, for all who practice it, is an excellent offering in the presence of the Most High" (Tob 4:11). Such a noble idea is endorsed by Sir 3:30, "As water extinguishes a blazing fire, so almsgiving atones for sin." Further, Sir 35:4 extols the almsgiving, equating, "and one who gives alms sacrifices a thank offering." Sirach 40:17 declares that the almsgiving endures forever, indicating that the almsgiving cannot be forgotten by God. The same idea is echoed by the psalmist in the Wisdom Psalm 112:9, "They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor; their righteousness endures forever; their horn is exalted in honor." Ezekiel makes Jerusalem aware of its transgressions, utilizing a metaphor of an unfaithful spouse in Ezek 16:1-58. Ezekiel compares the abominations of Jerusalem with that of Sodom, indicting, "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy" (Ezek 16:49). Sodom was eventually annihilated (Gen 19:24-25).

Generosity bears fruit

In order to inculcate generosity in human beings, Prov 11:24-25 describes what happens to a generous person, "A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water" (Prov 11:25).

Generosity is lauded by creating a contrast, "Those who despise their neighbors are sinners, but happy are those who are kind to the poor" (Prov 14:21). Another contrast is created between the wicked and righteous based on the virtue of generosity, "All day long the wicked covet, but the righteous give and do not hold back" (Prov 21:26). Such a contrast between them is endorsed in Prov 29:7, "The righteous know the rights of the poor; the wicked have no such understanding." Proverbs 22:9 makes a categorical statement: "Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor." A time-tested experience of human beings apropos of generosity is verbalized in Prov 28:27, "Whoever gives to the poor will lack nothing, but one who turns a blind eye will get many a curse." In praise of a capable wife, which is a poem presented in Prov 31:10-31 and chanted by every Israelite husband in front of his wife as soon as the Sabbath commences, generosity is listed as one of the precious qualities in verse 20: "She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy." Sirach 7:32-35 forms a catalogue of instructions, where generosity of all kinds toward the needy is mentioned, e.g., "Give graciously to all the living; do not withhold kindness even from the dead" (Sir 7:33). To give a befitting burial to the dead, too, constitutes an excellent act of munificence. Creating a contrast between the rejoicing of a generous person and the disastrous failure of a lawbreaker, Sir 40:14 teaches to be generous, "As a generous person has cause to rejoice, so lawbreakers will utterly fail." Sirach 34:25-27 goes to the extent of equating the one who deprives bread to the hungry, livelihood to the needy, and wages to the employee. In consonance with the legislation to be generous, this assertion in the Book of Sirach counts lack of basic sensitivity to others as equal to depriving them of their right to live. Evincing the consequences of generosity and equating the lack of generosity with homicide, the biblical wisdom insists that it behooves every human being to be generous.

One is recommended to do justice

The plight of the poor demands that justice is done to them. The Covenant Code (Exod 20:22-23:33) contains an apodictic law in Exod 23:6, which exacts justice to be done to the poor, "You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in their lawsuits." Almost synonymous parallel legislation appears in the Deuteronomic Code (Deut 12-26) as well, "You

shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice" (Deut 24:17a). The Holiness Code (Lev 17-26) has an apodictic law in Lev 19:13, which prohibits unjust acts like defrauding, stealing, or withholding the wages. Justice demands that the laborer should be paid the wages once the assigned job is carried out. The Deuteronomic Code (Deut 12-26) involves the legislation of the wages in Deut 24:14-15. What Lev 19:13 prohibited is endorsed by the Deut 24:14-15, but over and above Deut 24:15 prescribes what one is entitled to do and why one has to do so: "You shall pay them (the poor and needy laborers) their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt." The legal texts envisage a just society. The legal texts advocate justice to the poor in the Israelite society.

However, Isaiah observes in the same society diametrically opposite ambience, "Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey" (Isa 10:1-2). Prophets perceive the present and, based on that perception, predicts the future. This prediction may be either good news or bad news to the ears of their audience. Isaiah, too, predicts the future, which is good news. A ruler will come forth from the tribe of Judah in the family of Jesse. This ruler will judge the poor with righteousness (Isa 11:4). Isaiah gives hope to the Israelite society that what is commanded by the legal texts will be implemented by this future ruler.

The Wisdom Literature concords with the announcement to do justice put forward by the legal texts and the denouncement of injustice expressed in prophetic oracles. Proverbs 29:14 instructs a king to do justice, utilizing phraseology of prosper or perish: "If a king judges the poor with equity, his throne will be established forever." Intriguingly, the teaching of his mother to King Lemuel on the issue of consuming liquor in Prov 31:4-9 creates contrast between the ruler and the ruled. According to the advice of the king's mother, the ruler should not take strong drink in order not to pervert the rights of the afflicted. Contrariwise, she encourages the ruled that are poor to be inebriated with liquor to forget their poverty. The counsel is pragmatic, but not profiting. She charges the king, "Speak

out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Prov 31:9). The psalmist prays to God for the king in the Royal Psalm 72 and beseeches the very first grace, "May he (the king) judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice" (Ps 72:2). The Wisdom Literature section instructs the rulers as the obligation of judging their people devolves upon them.

One is prohibited to oppress

On the one hand, the legal texts commend generosity and justice; on the other hand, they condemn oppression and harassment. The Covenant Code (Exod 20:22-23:33) sternly prohibits oppression of a resident alien and abuse of a widow or orphan in unequivocal terms, "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan" (Exod 22:21-22).¹⁰ Transgression of this apodictic law will incur the Lord's wrath that will ensue in death. Again, this apodictic law is reiterated in Exod 23:9 in synonymous parallelism, "You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." The rationale of this parallel law in Exod 23:9 is, however, the knowledge of the heart of an alien. The Israelites have undergone oppression in Egypt as they were the resident aliens there. Their experience of oppression in Egypt must provide impetus for avoiding oppressing the strangers. The Holiness Code (Lev 17-26) forbids the harassment and harm to the physically impaired, "You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind" (Lev 19:14a). Deriving sadistic pleasure constitutes a type of oppression. The Holiness Code (Lev 17-26) prohibits also the oppression of the resident alien in Lev 19:33. The Holiness Code (Lev 17-26) moves a step further to prescribe how to replace the tendency to oppress: "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God" (Lev 19:34).

The Wisdom Literature, too, involves ethical teaching on the subject of oppression. Proverbs 22:16 ("Oppressing the poor in order to enrich oneself, and giving to the

¹⁰ Lohfink elaborates, apropos of the widows and orphans, that they were, in the whole of the ancient Near East, typical examples of those who have fallen to the lower limit of the conditions for existence. In a society, in which all human life was so closely integrated in the family structure, the dissolution of the family connection through the death of the relevant persons was the economic and social catastrophe. See Lohfink, *Option for the Poor*, 18.

rich, will lead only to loss”) cautions that oppression is counter productive. Proverbs 22:22 (“Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate”) downright prohibits oppression of the poor. However, since the wisdom sayings lack the force of either the legal text or prophetic oracle, Prov 22:23 provides the rationale, “for the Lord pleads their (poor’s) cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.” Faithful to its nature of analogizing, Prov 28:3 compares the ruler with the rain. As the rain is beneficial, so, too, is the ruler. However, torrential rain creates havoc and disaster, so, too, does the oppressive ruler (“A ruler who oppresses the poor is a beating rain that leaves no food” Prov 28:3).

In the Prophetic Literature, Isaiah denounces the iniquities of the people of Judah in Isa 1:1-15. Then, Isaiah enumerates the positive steps that the people could stride to counterbalance their trespasses: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isa 1:16-17). Isaiah lists all those remedial measures to create a healthy human society. Broadly speaking, Isaiah 1-39¹¹ has the pre-exilic Judah as his context, i.e., Judah before 586 B.C., when on the throne of Jerusalem was seated the king of Davidic dynasty and on the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple of Jerusalem enthroned the God of Israel. In spite of the Lord’s presence, the king and his citizens of Judah neglected the ordinances stipulated by the Lord. In the prolonged reproach to Jerusalem in Jer 2:1-37, where Jeremiah marshals abominations of the people, kings, officials, priests, and prophets, one iniquity is striking, “Also on your skirts is found the lifeblood of the innocent poor, though you did not catch them breaking in” (Jer 2:34a). Since the people have forgotten their Lord, the interpersonal relationships among them are vitiated. In Jer 22:3, the Lord commands Jeremiah to utter an oracle to the king, “Thus says the

¹¹ The Book of Isaiah is a collection of oracles from a number of prophets. Therefore, within the Book of Isaiah, it is necessary to distinguish the words, the biography, and autobiography of the prophet of that name, from the words of his disciples. The disciples of Isaiah interpreted and continued the work of their master. The oracles in chapters 40 to 55 are two centuries later than the time of Isaiah, and belong to the period at the end of the exile when Cyrus of Persia was about to overthrow Babylon. The oracles collected in chapters 56 to 66 are later still, and presuppose the situation in Palestine after the return from

Lord: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.” Both Isaiah and Jeremiah reveal that the Israelite society does not live according to the precepts mentioned in the legal texts. The ensuing outcome of such a gross omission was Babylonian exile from 586 B.C. to 538 B.C. As if the Israelite society has not learnt any lesson from the experience of the exile, the post-exilic Israelite society of Judah and Jerusalem, i.e., Israelite society after 538 B.C., is characterized by externalism in its practice of religion. Isaiah 56-66,¹² who is known as the post-exilic prophet, i.e., the prophet after 538 B.C., disapproves the Israelite society’s ritual of fasting that seems to be cosmetic, superficial, and eyewash. Isaiah 58:6-7 presents in the form of rhetorical questions the fast that the Lord approves. That fast includes ending injustice and oppression, developing the sharing ability of each individual, and reserving the essential commodities of bread-house-clothe for the needy (“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Isa 58:6-7).

In the vein of the prophets, the Teacher in Eccl 4:1-5 observes as a realist the Israelite society and, then, consoles. He counsels not to be shocked and alarmed at the oppression of the poor and the violation of human rights that are encountered in the Israelite society (Eccl 5:8a). He explicates the reason for such a stance in Eccl 5:8b, “for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them.” The English verb “watch” translates the Hebrew verb *shamar*. The

exile. See Stephen F. Winward, *A Guide to the Prophets* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), 73.

¹² Isaiah 56-66 or Third Isaiah contains the messages of a number of authors who were in the tradition of Second Isaiah, and lived in the period following the return from the exile. The background of Isaiah 56-66 is Palestine. There are allusions to native leaders. The moral and religious conditions are like those presupposed in the Books of Haggai and Zechariah (Exilic Prophets). Isaiah 56-66 as a whole probably belongs to the period shortly after the time of Haggai and Zechariah. See Winward, *A Guide to the Prophets*, 203.

Hebrew verb *shamar* has more than one meaning. The first meaning of the Hebrew verb *shamar* is "to watch." Thus, Eccl 5:8b can mean that there exists well-networked corruption in the Israelite society notwithstanding the bureaucratic supervision. The second meaning of the Hebrew verb *shamar* is "to wait for." Thus, Eccl 5:8b can mean that each official is waiting for his share from the one at the lower rank. The third meaning of the Hebrew verb *shamar* is "to protect." Thus, Eccl 5:8b can mean that the lower officials are protected by the higher ones. In short, as per the observation of the Teacher in the Book of Ecclesiastes, the Israelite society is completely and comprehensively corrupt.

Concern for, concession to, and consideration of the poor

On account of their plight, concern for, concession to, and consideration of the poor is in place. The Covenant Code (Exod 20:22-23:33) recommends to give rest to the field, vineyard, and olive orchard every seventh year. In the seventh year, whatever would grow in the field on its own would be meant for the poor and the wild animals ("but the seventh year you shall let it (the land) rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard" Exod 23:11). Every seventh day, the rest is prescribed for the livestock, the slaves, and strangers so that all refresh themselves ("Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed" Exod 23:12). The humanitarian concern for life in every form is evinced in this precept. The energy that is expended in toil causes the death of the body, so to say; the rest and relaxation resuscitate the body, so to say.¹³

¹³ Lohfink holds that the way in which the ancient Near East demanded the same treatment of the poor as does the Bible before the Bible came into existence indicate that concern for the poor is a human issue. The issue of humanity arose as soon as a society had developed to the point, where social classes developed and the rich and poor came into being. Finding biblical and non-biblical commonality with regard to concern for the poor gives Christians legitimate ground for working with all people of good will in their struggle for the rights of the poor. See Lohfink, *Option for the Poor*, 23-24.

The woman in the Israelite society¹⁴ was considered unclean after giving birth to a child for a fixed period of time (Lev 12:1-5). At the end of that prescribed period, the woman has to bring two different victims for two types of sacrifices for her purification (Lev 12:6-7). If the woman is poor, then a concession is granted, "If she cannot afford a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement on her

¹⁴ I summarize only the negative outlook toward woman from the article in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Created to serve man as a suitable helper, woman was formed from a rib taken from the man, and her essence as a human being is linked with her function as companion to the male (Gen 2:23-24). Woman was said to have played a key role in introducing disobedience (Gen 3). Antipathy to woman reaches its peak in the description of the evil temptress, who seeks to beguile the unsuspecting youth (Prov 6:24-35). The faithless woman was a symbol of apostate Israel (Ezek 23; Hos 2:4-22). The woman's chief function was childbearing (Gen 3:16). Childlessness was a cause of reproach and much personal suffering (Gen 11:30; 25:21; 29:31; Judg 13:2-3; 1 Sam 2:5). The bride was expected to be a virgin (Deut 22:13-21). After her preemption by payment of the bride price, willing submission to another man was tantamount to adultery (Deut 22:23-24), which was considered a crime of the severest order (Exod 20:14). A trial by ordeal was prescribed for a woman, whom her husband suspected of having committed adultery (Num 5:11-31). The foolish (Prov 9:13), the contentious and fretful (Prov 21:9, 19; 25:24; 27:15) as well as the fair but indiscreet (Prov 11:22) women were censured. The three annual pilgrimages were incumbent on men only (Exod 23:17; 34:23; Deut 16:16), but women often accompanied their husbands (1 Sam 1; 2; Neh 8:2). Women were eligible to take the Nazirite vow (Num 6:2ff), but a woman's competence to make religious vows was limited, being valid only if her male guardian did not intervene (Num 30:4-16). A man could sell his daughter as payment for a debt (Exod 21:7), but he was forbidden to force her into prostitution (Lev 19:29). The rule of release in the seventh year was not applicable to a woman (Exod 21:7-11) as it was to a man (Exod 21:1ff). Deuteronomy 15:12-17 seems to contemplate the possibility of an Israelite woman being sold into bondage for service only. There was no order of priestess in Israel. The term consecrated woman is commonly understood as cult prostitute (Deut 23:18; 1 Sam 2:22). Women were commonly associated with magic and divination (Exod 22:17; 1 Sam 28:3ff; Ezek 8:14). A

behalf, and she shall be clean" (Lev 12:8).¹⁵ The person, who is healed of his leprosy, is to be reinstated in the Israelite society through an elaborate ritual by a priest mentioned in Lev 14:1-20. A concession is granted to the healed person, if he is poor and cannot afford so much expense (Lev 14:21-32). The Israelites had a legal tradition to make an explicit vow to the Lord, concerning the equivalent for a human being. The payment that was required to be done for this vow amounted enormous (Lev 27:1-7). Therefore, there was provision of concession, "If any cannot afford the equivalent, they shall be brought before the priest and the priest shall assess them; the priest shall assess them according to what each one making a vow can afford" (Lev 27:8).

The Holiness Code (Lev 17-26) contains a casuistic law for the benefit of the poor and the alien, "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God" (Lev 19:9-10). The same law is reiterated verbatim in Lev 23:22. The reiteration signals the significance this law

woman was regarded impure both during her menstrual flow and for seven days thereafter (Lev 15:1ff). Woman was also regarded impure for the first seven days after giving birth to a male child and forbidden to touch consecrated objects or visit a sanctuary for the next 33 days; both figures are doubled if the child was a female (Lev 12:2-5). Polygamy is sanctioned (Deut 21:15). The wife is inferior to her husband, who will rule over her (Gen 3:16). The husband can divorce his wife, but she cannot divorce him (Deut 24:1-4). In Exod 20:14, the wife is mentioned together with husband's other goods. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Volume 16 (Jerusalem: Keterpress Enterprises, 1978), 623-626.

¹⁵ Incidentally, in Luke 2:22-24, Mother Mary avails herself of this concession granted to the poor at the end of her time of uncleanness and of blood purification, indicating that she hails from a poor class. In Luke 2:22-24, another legal requirement is also fulfilled. Jesus, being the firstborn male, has to be redeemed according to Exod 13:2, 13b. Since the God of Israel had spared the Israelite firstborn male in Egypt, the Israelite firstborn male belonged to the Lord (Exod 13:2) and had to be sacrificed to the Lord. This firstborn male can be bought back from the Lord by a substitute sacrificial victim (Exod 13:13b).

assumes in the Israelite society. The Deuteronomic Code (Deut 12-26) has casuistic laws in Deut 24:19-21 with regard to not picking the sheaf that is forgotten in the field at the harvest, not stripping what is left after beating olive trees, and not gleaning what is left at gathering the grapes. All these food commodities are destined for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. The Holiness Code (Lev 17-26) has a section, stipulating the duties of a kin toward his relative, when the latter lands into difficulty. These duties are called the duties of the redeemer, which are mentioned in Lev 25:25, 35-37, 39-43, 47-49. These duties of the redeemer are stipulated in detail because of the consideration of the poor. A seemingly strange advice is offered to King Lemuel by his mother in Prov 31:6-7, "Give strong drink to one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress, let them drink and forget their poverty, and remember their misery no more." This advice is aimed at dissuading the rulers from taking strong drinks and leaving them for the miserable. The strong drinks are analogous to opium, painkiller, and tranquilizer of today. The Book of Proverbs employs the technique of comparing or contrasting in driving home an ethical axiom. The ruler should never be a victim of alcoholism is emphasized by advising to leave liquor for the ruled. Though the advice is not wholesome, yet, alcohol is considered by many as handy remedy for temporary relief from their tension, troubles, and trials. I refrain from endorsing alcoholism as a medicine to one's distress.

Psalmist pray for the poor

The psalmists pray for the poor. Prayer forms an efficacious means to disclose the solidarity with the poor. The psalmist pleads in Ps 10:12, "Rise up, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand; do not forget the oppressed." In Community Lament Psalm 74, the psalmist prays to the Lord for his people, reminding the Lord that the Lord is the Liberator and the Lord has made the covenant. In his prayer, the psalmist solicits on behalf of the poor twice, "Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild animals; do not forget the life of your poor forever" (Ps 74:19), and "Do not let the downtrodden be put to shame; let the poor and needy praise your name" (Ps 74:21). The psalmist visualizes God sitting on the judgment throne as the judge in Psalm 82. The psalmist implores for the poor, "Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from

the hand of the wicked" (Ps 82:3-4).¹⁶ As part of the imploration for the self, the psalmist consoles himself in Individual Lament Psalm 102 that the Lord will hear the cry of the poor, "He will regard the prayer of the destitute and will not despise their prayer" (Ps 102:17). In another prayer for the self in Individual Lament Psalm 109, the psalmist identifies himself as poor and needy, urging the Lord to act on his behalf, "For I am poor and needy, and my heart is pierced within me" (Ps 109:22).

God defends the poor

The God of Israel, who identifies the Self of God with the poor, defends the poor.¹⁷ Isaiah extols the Lord, "For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress" (Isa 25:4a). Habakkuk praises the Lord, "You pierced with his own arrows the head of his warriors, who came like a whirlwind to scatter us, gloating as if ready to devour the poor who were in hiding" (Hab 3:14). Jeremiah, too, exalts the Lord, "For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of

¹⁶ Lohfink interprets Psalm 82 differently. In the Old Testament, there is only one God. In Psalm 82, the many other gods are deprived of their divinity, precisely because they have not fulfilled their obligation toward the poor of the world. In Psalm 82, the Lord formulates as a command what the real duty of the gods should be: "Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked" (Ps 82:3-4). The gods have not done what is commanded by the Lord. See Lohfink, *Option for the Poor*, 21.

¹⁷ Lohfink proposes a lofty understanding of the Lord as the defender of Israel in the Book of Exodus. The Lord's intervention does not aim to lighten the suffering, but to remove the poor from the impoverishing situation. Nowhere in the ancient Near East is such divine aid to the poor encountered. According to the ancient Near Eastern texts, the reader would have expected only that the Lord would hear the cry of the poor and come to their aid in Egypt. If the reader looks beyond the horizon of the ancient Near East, the reader might perhaps have expected that the Lord would have tried to reform the system by means of a revolution or a peaceful negotiation between the Lord's servants and the king of Egypt. But the Lord does more. The Lord takes the poor completely outside the Egyptian system. See Lohfink, *Option for the Poor*, 39-40.

evildoers" (Jer 20:13b). Isaiah 25 is taken to be stemming from 4th century to 2nd century B.C. The genre of Isaiah 25 is apocalyptic. Habakkuk 3 is a psalm, which may be from a later date than that of Habakkuk. Habakkuk prophesied between 605 B.C. and 598 B.C. According to Habakkuk 3, God comes to save God's anointed people from their enemies. At that time, the enemies were the Babylonian Empire. Jeremiah prophesied between 626 B.C. and 580 B.C., i.e., just prior to and during the Babylonian exile. All the three prophets at different times in the history of Israel, when Israel was reeling under foreign rulers, experience the Lord defending the poor. The prophets are convinced that the Lord has defended or saved or rescued the Israelites from the neighboring mighty empires. On their own strength, the Israelites would never have survived the onslaught of their enemies.

Proverbs 23:10 warns against encroaching the fields of orphans, "for their redeemer is strong; he will plead their cause against you" (Prov 23:11). The redeemer of the orphans is God. The daily experience of the commoner is expressed in the Wisdom Literature section. In the Book of Job, when Job laments and curses the day of his birth in chapter 3 after enduring insurmountable sufferings for seven days and seven nights in strict silence and solitude, his friend Eliphaz attempts to persuade him that Job has sinned. In the extensive exposition, Eliphaz propounds that God is the defender of the poor, "But he (God) saves the needy from the sword of their mouth, from the hand of the mighty. So the poor have hope, and injustice shuts its mouth" (Job 5:15-16). Another friend of Job, Elihu, in his prolonged discourse reveals God as the one who hears the cry of the poor ("and he heard the cry of the afflicted" Job 34:28b). Elihu characterizes God further, "He (God) does not keep the wicked alive, but gives the afflicted their right" (Job 36:6) and "He (God) delivers the afflicted from their affliction, and opens their ear by adversity" (Job 36:15). The author of the Book of Job makes the friends of Job the author's mouthpiece to communicate the experience of any sufferer, namely, that God stands by the side of the sufferer. Sirach 11:12b notes, "but the eyes of the Lord look kindly upon them (the poor and needy), he lifts them out of their lowly condition." Sirach 21:5 exudes confidence that "The prayer of the poor goes from their lips to the ears of God, and his judgment comes speedily," connoting that God defends the poor.

The God of Israel depicted by the psalmists in the face of physical, material, and spiritual turmoil is the most reliable rock to hold on to. In Ps 9:9, which is Individual Lament, the psalmist expresses his experience of God, "The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble." The psalmist praises the Lord, because "he (the Lord) does not forget the cry of the afflicted" (Ps 9:12b). The psalmist believes that "the needy shall not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the poor will perish forever (Ps 9:18). The psalmist presents his observation, "the helpless commit themselves to you; you have been the helper of the orphan" (Ps 10:14b). The psalmist has the hope, "O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek, you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed" (Ps 10:17-18a). Hope is normally founded on the past experience of the Lord. The psalmist reports the resolve of the Lord, "'Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now rise up,'" says the Lord; "I will place them in safety for which they long" (Ps 12:5). The psalmist challenges all those who harm the poor, because the Lord is the refuge of the poor (Ps 14:6). Both Psalm 12 and Psalm 14 are classified as Community Lament. The psalmist praises the Lord in Individual Thanksgiving Psalm 34 for what he underwent in his own life, "This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble" (Ps 34:6). The psalmist is convinced that "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord rescues them from them all" (Ps 34:19). The psalmist has faith in the Lord to defend him, because he knows that the Lord delivers the weak from those too strong for them (Ps 35:10, which is Individual Lament). The psalmist manifests his trust in the Lord, "As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God" (Ps 40:17, which also is Individual Lament). The same sentiment is shared by another Individual Lament Psalm 70:5, "But I am poor and needy, hasten to me, O God! You are my help and my deliverer; O Lord, do not delay!" The psalmist carves the portrait of God in Community Thanksgiving Psalm 68, "Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation" (Ps 68:5), and describes the deeds of God, "God gives the desolate a home to live in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity" (Ps 68:6a). God's other acts, according to the psalmist, include "He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes,

with the princes of his people. He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children" (Ps 113:7-9, which is Hymn),¹⁸ "The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down" (Ps 145:14, which also is Hymn). The psalmist magnifies God with thanksgiving in Individual Lament Psalm 69, "For the Lord hears the needy, and does not despise his own that are in bonds" (Ps 69:33). The psalmist invites the beneficiaries of the benevolence of God to express their gratitude to God in Community Thanksgiving Psalm 107, "For he satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things" (Ps 107:9). The psalmist acknowledges the Lord as the one who raises up the needy out of distress (Ps 107:41a). The psalmist praises the Lord, "For he stands at the right hand of the needy, to save them from those who would condemn them to death" (Ps 109:31). The psalmist claims, "I know that the Lord maintains the cause of the needy and executes justice for the poor" (Ps 140:12, which is Individual Lament).

God's promise to the poor

As the present of the poor is pervaded with problems, the Lord promises them better future. Such a promise corresponds well with the characterization of the Lord as the defender of the poor. In an oracle against Philistia (Isa 14:28-32), on the occasion of the demise of Ahaz—the king of Judah, Isaiah predicts and promises that the poor of Judah will work and live in safety. Situated on the west of Judah, Philistia was the archenemy of Judah. Once the king of Judah is no more, the people of Judah could expect an invasion from Philistia. In the case of invasion, the poor of Judah would form the most vulnerable section. So, Isaiah promises that "The firstborn of the poor will graze, and the needy lie down in safety" (Isa 14:30a). In the same oracle, Isaiah goes on avowing that "The Lord has founded Zion, and the needy among his people will find refuge in her" (Isa 14:32b). At some other time, Isaiah pronounces an oracle of doom and darkness against the city of Jerusalem in chapter 29. However, as there is a silver lining of the lightening in the thick clouds of the sky, so, there is a ray of hope in that doom of Jerusalem,

¹⁸ Psalm 137:7-9 is synonymously parallel to Hannah's prayer in 1 Sam 2:8a, where Hannah attributes the richness of anyone to the Lord.

“On that day the deaf shall hear the words of a scroll, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the neediest people shall exult in the Holy One of Israel” (Isa 29:18-19). Chapter 41 of Isaiah¹⁹ has a different context, the context of the Babylonian exile. The exilic period lasts from 586 B.C. to 538 B.C. The Babylonian Empire, whose seat was in the present day’s Iraq, had carried 20% of the Jerusalemite intellectual males into Iraq as captives. About 80% of the poor Jerusalemites were left behind. The period of exile turned out to be a time of ordeal for both the exiled Jerusalemites and the non-exiled Jerusalemites. The exiled Jerusalemites could not reconcile with the fact that a pagan king could destroy their Temple of Jerusalem, where their almighty God was ever present, and could drag away the princes, priests, and prophets of Jerusalem into exile. The non-exiled Jerusalemites lacked the administrative skill and intelligentsia to govern the dilapidated Jerusalem. As both camps of the Jerusalemites were traversing through the deep darkness of Babylonian regime, the Lord promises them through Second Isaiah. In the target audience of this promise, the poor are explicitly mentioned, “When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them” (Isa 41:17).

The psalmist counsels not to be afraid of the wicked, but to be patient in Ps 37, which is Wisdom Psalm as it offers a practical advice for daily living. The rationale for such an exhortation includes the foretelling, “The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows to bring down the poor and needy, to kill those who walk uprightly; their sword shall enter their own heart, and their bows shall be broken” (Ps 37:14-15). The psalmist mentions in Royal Psalm 132, the oath that the Lord has made to David that the Lord has chosen Zion as the Lord’s dwelling place.

¹⁹ The oracles in Isaiah 40 to 55 are the utterances of a prophet of the sixth century B.C., who lived among the exiles in Babylon. He addressed his words of consolation and hope to his fellow-Israelites shortly before the fall of Babylon to Cyrus the Persian (538 B.C.). This anonymous prophet is usually designated Second Isaiah or Isaiah of Babylon, because his oracles were subsequently added to the scroll on which those of Isaiah of Jerusalem were written. See Winward, *A Guide to the Prophets*, 170-171.

Then, the psalmist declares what the Lord promises about the poor, "I will abundantly bless its (Zion's) provisions, I will satisfy its poor with bread" (Ps 132:15).

God rewards and God punishes

For Amos, the reward giver to or the punishment inflictor on his audience that consists of the Northern Kingdom of Israel is none other than the Self of God. Hailing from the Southern Kingdom of Judah, Amos is commissioned by God to open the eyes of the Israelites to their deeds that are incongruent to their status of covenanted people. The economic disparity, creating the discriminatory classes of rich and poor, has made the rich more hungry to become richer at the expense of the poor. Amos, in his oracle against Israel (Amos 2:6-8), denounces the transgressions of the rich against the poor and announces the resolve of the Lord that the Lord will not revoke the punishment. Intriguingly, Amos impeaches the rich women of Israel in Amos 4:1. From the perspective of Amos, the Israelite women are accomplices of their husbands in the oppression of the poor. The Lord will penalize these women in the form of exile into Assyria (Amos 4:2-3). Continuing his tirade against Israel, Amos makes Israel cognizant of its abhorring offenses and the Lord's impending retribution, "Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine" (Amos 5:11). The Lord interprets a vision of a basket of summer fruit unveiled to Amos in these words, "The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by" (Amos 8:2b). Then, Amos enumerates the wealthy Israelite merchants' malpractices and deceits against the poor in 8:4-6 as the cause of such cataclysmic consequences.

Ezekiel was taken into exile to Babylon around 598 B.C. in the first deportation of the Jerusalemites by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. The first deportation has not taught any lesson to those Jerusalemites who were left behind. Evading the learning from the deportation, the deported Jerusalemites, too, attributed their fate to the misdeeds of their ancestors. The exiled Jerusalemites ignored completely their own personal responsibility for the exile. To impart an unforgettable truth

that each individual is accountable for one's own life, Ezekiel utters the word of the Lord, "Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine; it is only the person who sins that shall die" (Ezek 18:4). To paraphrase, the Lord rewards the responsible person, but punishes the irresponsible one. Ezekiel 22:23-31 forms a list of iniquities of different sections of the society. The final verse 31 presents God as the punisher, "Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them; I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath; I have returned their conduct upon their heads, says the Lord God."

In the post-exilic Jerusalem, Third Isaiah substantiates in chapter 58 the concept of God rewarding the charitable acts. One such act of charity constitutes feeding the hungry, "if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday" (Isa 58:10). Another post-exilic Prophet Zechariah addresses the people of Judah, instructing, "Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another" (Zech 7:9-10). Then, Zechariah notes that because the people refused to listen to the Lord and live accordingly, the Lord chastised them with the exile (Zech 7:11-14). Daniel 4:1-27 narrates the dream that King Nebuchadnezzar had and the interpretation of that dream that Daniel offered. In verse 27, Daniel advises King Nebuchadnezzar, revealing that God is the reward giver, "Therefore, O king, may my counsel be acceptable to you: atone for your sins with righteousness, and your iniquities with mercy to the oppressed, so that your prosperity may be prolonged." Daniel 4:27b employs passive voice, which is called *passiva divina* [divine passive or theological passive]. Theological passive signifies that the agent of the action is divine. In Dan 4:27b, the agent that would prolong the king's prosperity is God. Prophets unanimously hold the Lord as the judge, who commends the faithful but condemns the unfaithful.

The understanding of the Lord as the one who rewards or punishes propagated by the Prophetic Literature section is enhanced by the Wisdom Literature section. Proverbs 21:13 ("If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard") emphasizes that the

punishment giver is God by employing theological passive in the phrase “not be heard”, implying that God will not listen to the one who refuses to listen to the cry of the poor. The psalmist puts into words the experience of receiving the reward for being considerate to the poor in Ps 41:1, which is Individual Lament, “Happy are those who consider the poor; the Lord delivers them in the day of trouble.”

Obedience generates prosperity

If the Lord is the reward giver, then obedience to the dictates of the Lord would ensure prosperity. The Deuteronomic Code (Deut 12-26) contains an apodictic law regarding remission of debts in Deut 15:1-3. Then, there comes an assertion that obedience brings prosperity “There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today” (Deut 15:4-5). Such an understanding of law and obedience vis-à-vis reward and punishment is called Deuteronomistic theology, which can be worded as: if one obeys, one prospers; if one disobeys, one perishes.

Zophar, the third friend of Job, in his second dialogue with Job in chapter 20, puts forward the Deuteronomistic theology in the reverse order. Zophar observes some people suffering in every sphere; so, Zophar infers the cause of such a phenomenon, “For they have crushed and abandoned the poor, they have seized a house that they did not build” (Job 20:19). Job, too, consents to the Deuteronomistic theology, acknowledging that since he has obeyed, he prospered. In Job 29:1-11, Job remembers his prosperity in the past. In Job 29:12-16, Job attributes his prosperity to his obedience to what was demanded from a human being. For example, Job clarifies that his most revered status among all the strata of the society was “because I delivered the poor who cried, and the orphan who had no helper” (Job 29:12). Job 31:1-40 constitutes Job’s last defense, wherein the understanding that obedience to the directives of humanitarian concerns engender prosperity and neglect of such directives results in deprivation is indirectly emphasized. For example, “if I (Job) have eaten its (land’s) yield without payment, and caused the death of its owners; let thorns grow instead of wheat, and

foul weeds instead of barley" (Job 31:39-40). Sirach 29:8-13 recommends almsgiving and, thus, obedience to the laws, because there is net profit. "Lay up your treasure according to the commandments of the Most High, and it will profit you more than gold. Store up almsgiving in your treasury, and it will rescue you from every disaster" (Sir 29:11-12). The Wisdom Literature section augments the idea of obedience by demonstrating in real life how the obedient have prospered and how the disobedient have perished. The legal texts provide the theory; the wisdom texts provide the praxis.

Conclusion

The books of the Old Testament are written by different authors, for different audiences, at different times, in different places, employing different genres; yet, they concord in presenting the understanding of the poor. Poverty in terms of barrenness or sickness forms an enigmatic design of the Lord, which is inscrutable to human rationalization. Concurrently, poverty does not constitute the last word of the Lord as evinced by the birth of Samuel. Either barren Hannah or bearing Hannah, both are the same in the eyes of the Lord; so, too, either poor or rich, both are the same in the sight of the Lord. The poor and rich share the equal dignity from the divine perspective. Yet, to identify the Self of the Lord with either the poor or the rich, the Lord opts for the poor. This option of the Lord for the poor invites the reader to perceive the poor with a divine eye. To spurn the inferiority or superiority in the poor or rich respectively, legal system advocate the parity between the poor and rich. To paraphrase, no preference to the poor or no deference to the rich is envisaged as far as the law is concerned. Yet, the humanitarian concern finds its highly-deserved place even in the legal system, when it is asserted that to satisfy the hunger the poor may steal a piece of bread. An analogy can be adduced: In a race, the lame and the two-legged cannot be counted equal. To draw the same line as the departure mark for both involves violation of the humane system. Humanitarian concern supersedes legal concern. In real life, the poor remain at a disadvantaged spot with respect to the rich in terms of wealth, friends, and influence. Thus, though ideally both the rich and poor are equal, actually both are unequal.

Economic poverty takes the center stage as six responsible factors are deliberated, viz., laziness, ignoring instruction, injustice, disproportionate feasting, alcoholism, and pursuit of worthless. Material poverty is presented as human-created phenomenon. To live a happy and healthy life, one is encouraged to counteract the poverty from monetary point of view. The plight of the poor is related extensively in order to evoke humanitarian response toward the poor. The humanitarian response can be rendered by being generous to the poor. Since the poor need supportive hands opened out to them and since the opened out hands are filled commensurately by the Lord, everyone is urged to be generous. Generosity can be implemented by lending cash or kind, foregoing interest, treating justly the coworkers, giving alms, and burying the dead.

The Lord defends the poor in terms of Israel in general or an Israelite in particular. In the political arena, Israel keeps succumbing to the superpowers that arise in its vicinity. The first such superpower was the Egyptian Empire. As Norbert F. Lohfink interprets the Exodus, the Lord removes the Israelites from the oppressive system in Egypt. The Lord ushers the Israelites into a new society, where the plight of the poor becomes a history of the past. Another superpower inflicts the exile. The Lord promises to bring back the exiled Jerusalemites from the Babylonian Empire and through the instrumentality of the Persian Empire fulfills that promise. Any individual Israelite could confidently turn to the Lord in her or his agony and the Lord hastenes to rescue that individual. The Lord rewards those who devote themselves for the uplifting of the poor; but punishes those who engage themselves in dominating the poor. The defeats of Israel at the hands of the contiguous empires were interpreted as the just retribution of the Lord, not the might of the neighbors. Job acknowledges that he enjoyed a very reputed status among all the sections of the society precisely because he obeyed the Lord in minutest detail. Such an acknowledgement reveals that the reward giver is the Lord and obedience to the Lord guarantees the reward.